

Sri Lanka: Dipped Products announces factory relocation

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The Dipped Products Company has told the media that its Venigros factory in Weliweriya will be relocated to the nearby Biyagama Free Trade Zone (FTZ). On August 1, the factory was forced to close amid local residents' opposition over allegations that it was polluting the ground water in the area.

By moving the factory, the company is attempting to wash its hands of any responsibility for the damage it has already caused in the Weliweriya area. The many questions that must be answered include:

- * What will the company do to address the environmental issues affecting the 1,000 families in Weliweriya, including the pollution caused by the waste water from its factory?

- * What will the company do to ensure the same problem does not take place at the new location?

- * What will happen to the jobs of the 600 workers employed in Venigros and its branches? Only 60 workers were permanent and the rest were hired from "manpower companies" on a contract basis.

The company owners have answered none of these questions and continue to deny all responsibility for polluting water at Weliweriya.

The government and the media work on behalf of the company. They have sown the illusion that everything would be resolved by the factory's relocation. President Mahinda Rajapakse's government is also trying to wash its hands of any responsibility for the military crackdown on a water pollution protest on August 1 that killed three youth and injured dozens of protesters. Some of the victims now have permanent disabilities.

The opposition United National Party (UNP) and its pseudo-left allies, the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and United Socialist Party (USP), have also promoted the lie that shifting the factory will end the problems.

This parochial demand displays contempt for the factory workforce and the people in the new area where the plant will be placed.

The NSSP and USP have portrayed the right-wing UNP as a champion of democracy in contrast to the ruling United Peoples Freedom Party (UPFA) by participating in the UNP's protests against the military crackdown. The UNP is a big-business party that defends corporate interests and has exploited anger over the pollution to boost its votes.

Dipped Products announced the factory's relocation after failing to convince people that it was not responsible for the water pollution.

At a press briefing on November 19, the management hid behind reports by government institutions in an effort to prove the factory had not polluted the water. But the reports of the Central Environment Authority and Water Board were biased toward the company.

The management did not refer to the Government Analyst (GA) report which, in a limited way, indicated the factory was responsible for polluting the area's water. According to that report, a complete wastewater treatment system was not in place inside the factory. "At the time of sampling, only the oxidation ditches of the treatment process were functioning and the other steps of the treatment process were not functioning," it stated.

The report made clear that further treatment measures should have been followed before the wastewater was emitted. The GA report only hinted at what was really taking place. A much more extensive investigation is needed.

The government has not published any of these reports. It is notorious for covering up anything that is adverse to its agenda. Dipped Products is part of Hayley's, a major Sri Lankan company with

connections to the government.

The media is also on the company's side. An *Island* editorial on December 28 said the factory was being moved "although the available evidence strongly suggests that the problem of polluted/substandard well water in the area has nothing to do with the factory." What evidence? Neither the *Island* nor the rest of the establishment media has offered any proof or carried out an independent investigation.

The government eventually gave the green light for the factory's relocation in large part to deflect local anger in the lead-up to provincial elections in April. It also promised piped water to people in the area, initially at a connection cost per house of 17,500 rupees. After protests, the amount was reduced to 3,000 rupees, and 2,000 rupees for those on welfare subsidies. Even then, many people cannot afford the cost. The connections have not yet started.

Local people spoke to Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members campaigning for an independent workers' inquiry into the Weliweriya water pollution.

A three-wheeler taxi driver said: "This [the shifting of the factory] is not a victory for the people. Groundwater in the area has already been polluted. Even if the factory is removed, this disaster will not be over, even after 20 years, I think. An independent workers' inquiry is needed to expose the disastrous conditions produced by production for profit."

A worker sacked during a strike in March 2013 commented: "Our problems can't be solved under these governments. A workers' inquiry into water pollution and on workers' problems is very valuable in unmasking the truth." He worked at the Venigros factory in Weliweriya for 12 years before being sacked for striking against the victimisation of workers. He said the conditions in the factory were bad when he worked there.

A driver said: "I buy two bottles of water per day for our baby. We use well water for drinking and bathing. We know it is polluted. The government is not giving us clean water, but they spend money holding night car races in Colombo. It is good to have a workers' inquiry. How many governments have ruled this country? How many commissions have been appointed? But they have brought nothing good for the people. I think we can learn the truth only from this type of inquiry."

The Independent Workers' Inquiry is collecting information about the pollution of the area's water by the Venigros factory and the threat posed to villagers and workers. It is also investigating the conditions facing workers in the factory and probing who was responsible for the August 1 killings. The inquiry will examine how to solve the broader issue of industrial pollution that faces residents and workers.

We urge workers, youth and other people to join in the Workers' Inquiry.

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