

Sri Lankan SEP holds public meeting on workers inquiry into water pollution

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12 February 2014

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Sri Lanka held a successful public meeting on February 2 in Gampaha to explain the significance of the Independent Workers Inquiry into Weliweriya Water Pollution. Residents of the Weliweriya area and students were among the audience.

The SEP launched the campaign for the inquiry into the suspected contamination of the local water supply by the Venigros Dipped Products Company last year. On August 1, President Mahinda Rajapakse's government deployed the military to attack villagers who protested over the pollution. Two students and a young worker were killed and dozens more were injured.

The public meeting was built through a vigorous campaign by SEP and IYSSE members in the area. Several thousand copies of a SEP statement and other WSWs articles related to the inquiry were distributed, winning widespread support.

In an attempt to deflect mass opposition against the pollution and military crackdown, Rajapakse's government pledged to provide running water to villagers. The promise was made to hoodwink voters for the Western Provincial Council elections on March 29.

One small shop owner told campaigners: "The government is distributing forms [to apply for water connections] among villagers. Those who went to hand over the forms were asked to pay for a water connection. As with other promises, this is an election fraud and will be thrown aside when the election is over." He took several dozen copies of a SEP leaflet to circulate among his customers.

The meeting was chaired by M. Rajapakse, one of the party's candidates for Colombo District in the Western

Provincial Council elections. SEP political committee member Vilani Peiris, who heads the party's slate of candidates, delivered the main report.

Explaining the necessity for a workers inquiry, Peiris pointed out: "Though six months have passed since the military's killings, the Magistrate's Inquiry is yet to be finished. The Gampaha magistrate is on record saying he does not have the power to inquire into the military and consulted the attorney general about it. The testimonies from the eye-witnesses and the military personnel are yet to be recorded. The government is covering up those responsible for the killing.

"Big business is very anxious about the situation. The Dipped Product Company has denied any responsibility for the pollution of the ground water."

Peiris said the company had insisted that the factory should reopen, but angry protests by villagers prevented the company's repeated attempts to do so.

Highlighting the health problems caused by the water pollution, Peiris said numbers of residents had become ill and required medical treatment. Exposing the government's efforts to defend the Venigros company against the villagers, she explained: "The government wants to send a signal to investors, both foreign and local, that it is ready to do anything to defend their interests."

The speaker said the military's Weliweriya shootings were not an isolated incident. The Rajapakse government also deployed police commandos to suppress striking Katunayaka Free Trade Zone workers in 2011, killing one person. In 2012, police commandoes fired at fishermen protesting in Chilaw against the government's fuel price hike, killing one of the demonstrators. The repressive police-military machine developed during 26 years of civil war against the Tamil people was now directed at the working

people and oppressed masses.

Peiris emphasised that spontaneous protests alone could not defeat the government's plans for a police state. The events in Egypt since 2011 showed that workers needed the leadership of a revolutionary Marxist party. Only the SEP was fighting to solve the crisis of leadership in the working class.

Claims by the right-wing, opposition United National Party (UNP) to oppose the water pollution were a fraud, Peiris said. "The Siyane Water Protection Movement, led by a UNP provincial leader, Pramitha Hettiarachchi, is working to pit villagers against the Venigros workers. This movement's demand to shift the factory to another area is reactionary. It not only suppresses the issue of the workers' jobs, but also completely ignores the damage to the health of residents and workers where the factory is to be relocated."

Peiris outlined the treacherous role played by the pseudo-left groups, the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and the United Socialist Party (USP), in assisting the UNP's reactionary intervention among Weliweriya residents. "The NSSP and USP oppose any independent mobilisation of the working class and try to politically tie the workers to the UNP, promoting this right-wing capitalist party as a defender of democratic rights." She stressed the need for the working class to reject these pseudo-lefts and fight for a socialist program to place the means of production under the democratic control of the working people.

SEP political committee member Panini Wijesiriwardane explained the Venigros factory's impact on water quality. He referred to a report submitted by the Government Analyst to the Gampaha Magistrates Court after an investigation into a water discharge from the factory. The report revealed limited but important facts. The water treatment system at the factory was not working properly and the discharges did not meet accepted standards.

Wijesiriwardane said the truth about the water contamination could not be expected from government agencies. "A good example is the fate of the report from an investigation made by the Industrial Technology Institute (ITI). President Rajapakse ordered the ITI investigation into the Weliweriya water pollution in an attempt to pacify the villagers. But no report has been made public. This underscores the necessity for the Independent Workers Inquiry."

A lively discussion followed. An elderly villager agreed with the speakers, commenting: "When we were small, there were various types of fish in the water streams. After school we used to go fishing as a hobby with our friends. But now it has become a thing of the past. That shows the water is contaminated."

A young student, a friend of a student killed in an August 1 military crackdown, described how the government sent intelligence officers to the funerals to gather information. "When they were questioned, one person lied, saying he was from a nearby village. There are no clear answers yet to the questions, 'who deployed the security forces' for the August 1 crackdown, and 'who ordered the shooting.' Sri Lanka is ruled by a group of relatives [a reference to President Rajapakse and his family members] and they all share responsibility for the killing."

The meeting unanimously passed a resolution expressing support for the Workers Inquiry into the Attack on the Detroit Institute of Art and the Bankruptcy of Detroit launched by the SEP in the US. The resolution stated: "Striking facts about the criminality of capitalist corporations and rulers are being revealed by the Workers Inquiry into the Bankruptcy of Detroit and the Independent Workers Inquiry into Weliweriya Water Pollution. They will play a decisive role in mobilising the international working class against this brutal capitalist system."



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