Sri Lanka: Police intimidation against SEP workers inquiry on industrial pollution

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As the Independent Workers Inquiry into Water Pollution in Weliweriya in Sri Lanka receives growing support, the police, acting on behalf of the Dipped Products Company, are attempting to intimidate Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaigners. The SEP warns that the police actions are in preparation for a witch-hunt against its members and supporters.

The SEP launched the Workers Inquiry in November to expose the government and media cover-up of ground water pollution that Weliweriya villagers allege was caused by the Venigros rubber glove factory operated by Dipped Products. On August 1, the government deployed the army to suppress a protest by thousands of villagers demanding the factory's closure, and shot dead two students and a young worker. More than 30 people were injured.

The Workers Inquiry is investigating: the Venigros company's pollution of the local water supply and associated health dangers for villagers and workers; the exploitative working conditions in the factory; and who was responsible for the August 1 killings.

The SEP has been reliably informed that the police are carrying out surveillance of the party's campaign, including:

* In December, police intelligence officers photographed two SEP members distributing a leaflet announcing the inquiry.

* On January 29, an officer of Gampaha police telephoned R. B. Rajapakse, an SEP member in the area, and asked for details about the organisers and speakers at the party's public meeting on February 2.

* On February 2, Jude Nishantha, the driver of a three-wheel taxi working at Weliweriya, was summoned to the intelligence section of the nearby Gampaha police station for questioning about the SEP and its meeting. SEP members had hired his taxi on January 31 as part of their campaign.

According to Nishantha, police showed him photos of two SEP members pasting posters. Police officers asked whether he was an SEP member and what he knew about the party. Nishantha said he knew nothing. Nishantha, along with other three-wheel taxi drivers, participated in the protests by Weliweriya villagers and was injured during the army attack on August 1.

* Two police intelligence officers in civilian clothes tried to enter the meeting hall on February 2 but left when asked by SEP members about their identities.

The police surveillance of the SEP and its members is part of broader attempts to intimidate the Weliweriya villagers since protests over the water supply began last April.

The Sri Lankan police and military are notorious for abductions, killings, disappearances and other forms of intimidation, which were widely used during the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Such repression is also directed against the government's opponents and critics, and more broadly against workers and youth campaigning for their basic rights.

Last October 30, Jude Nishantha was threatened by thugs. While he was participating in a live discussion at the privately-owned TNL TV channel about the Weliweriya military assault, a gang went to his house and warned his wife and children that they would kill him if he was involved in further campaigning against the Venigros factory.

One gang member was identified as Chandana, who worked as a Venigros supervisor and organised demonstrations on behalf of the factory. On the same night, Nishantha made a complaint to a nearby police station but the police have so far taken no action.

On February 16, G. Kumaradasa, the convener of the

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Movement for the Protection of Environment in Siyane, was physically attacked by thugs at Yakkala, five kilometres from Weliweriya. During the assault, Kumaradasa was warned to stop the protests against the factory. His organisation has filed a case against the factory.

Kumaradasa was admitted to Gampaha Hospital. His assailants were only detained by police after his wife made a formal complaint and Weliweriya residents protested against the lack of action. The thugs were released immediately after Kumaradasa was discharged from hospital and continue to roam freely, with the protection of the police and government politicians in the area.

The SEP condemned the attack on Kumaradasa. He told the WSWS that Water Resources Minister Dinesh Gunawardane promised to provide a piped water supply for villagers at the cost of 3,000 rupees. However, the area water board office had wanted him to meet another minister. “Since the government politicians attempt to exploit the situation, we decided not to go,” Kumaradasa said. He thought this could be one reason for the assault.

From the outset, the government has been determined to protect Dipped Products, which is owned by Hayleys, a leading Sri Lankan company. Instead of investigating the allegations of Weliweriya residents and providing clean drinking water, the government branded the protesters as “saboteurs” and “conspirators” and ordered the military crackdown, seeking to send a message to investors that their interests would be protected.

When the military crackdown provoked widespread outrage, President Mahinda Rajapakse promised to test the water and investigate the shooting. But all the reports by state institutions have whitewashed the company. Amid continuing protests, the company announced that the factory would be shifted to the Biyagama Free Trade Zone—without any guarantee that ground water in that area would not be polluted.

The company is deeply concerned about the SEP’s Workers Inquiry, which seeks to expose its conspiracy with the government and police to cover up the impact of industrial pollution and suppress the protests. SEP campaigners have been explaining the necessity of a workers’ and peasants’ government and socialist policies to combat the capitalist system, which is based on the profits of a tiny wealthy few at the expense of the majority of working people.

The SEP opposes the police-state methods of the Rajapakse government, which, as the military crackdown on Weliweriya protest demonstrated, are aimed at suppressing the growing resistance of the working class and rural poor to the attacks on their living standards. The police surveillance of the SEP campaign in Weliweriya is a sharp warning of the preparation for further repression against working people in the area and more broadly.

We urge workers and youth to oppose the police measures, support the Workers Inquiry, and actively participate in its activities in order to expose the truth about the actions of the company, the government and the security forces.

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