

Sri Lanka: SEP campaigns among villagers protesting water pollution

Our correspondents
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Socialist Equality Party (SEP) supporters visited Thunnana in Hanwella, about 30 kilometres from Colombo, as part of the party's campaign for tomorrow's provincial council elections. The village is currently under siege by government security forces following the brutal crackdown on a peaceful protest by local residents over water pollution on March 16.

The villagers were demanding closure of Hanwella Rubber Products (HRP), which is suspected of contaminating local water. HRP is a subsidiary of Dipped Products, which is also accused of polluting water in Weliveriya, in the Gampaha district. Both factories produce rubber gloves.

Police and elite commandos are patrolling Thunnana day and night in an attempt to intimidate villagers and prevent further protests. SEP team members observed a security forces vehicle as it entered the village and noticed a police vehicle monitoring all movements near the HRP factory.

Two officers from a nearby police station demanded that the SEP team stop campaigning in the area, claiming that it could "provoke" villagers. SEP members complained about this interference at the local police station and contacted the Elections Commissioner. The commissioner said he could not do anything about it. The team insisted on the party's right to speak with villagers and continued its campaign.

Villagers warmly welcomed the SEP team. Men and women of all ages were anxious to discuss the political issues confronting them. Concerned about police recriminations, they requested anonymity when commenting on HRP's pollution and various health issues attributed to contaminated water from the factory. Villagers also explained that the factory emitted an airborne compound early in the mornings, causing respiratory problems.

"Every house here has [medicinal] inhalers," one young mother said. A pregnant woman confirmed that she also suffered breathing problems. She wanted to leave the village but could not afford housing elsewhere.

HRP recently laid a pipeline to provide water to a small area in Thunnana. Several families were suspicious of management's "motives" and wanted to know why they were distributing water "free of charge." SEP supporters explained that Dipped Products recorded large profits during the past two years and that management would regard the pipeline's cost as negligible if it dissipated villagers' opposition to the polluting plant.

Following the March 16 crackdown, three government ministers reportedly told cabinet that the Hanwella and Weliveriya protests were being orchestrated by "vested interests" in a conspiracy to sabotage the Sri Lankan economy. President Mahinda Rajapakse urged the ministers to be "vigilant."

In reality, the government, which is attempting to promote Sri Lanka as a cheap labour platform, faces a political and economic crisis. There is mounting opposition to the government's enforcement of International Monetary Fund austerity measures. The brutal attack on villagers, just weeks before the provincial elections, was another signal to investors that their interests would be protected at all costs.

One woman told the SEP team she was shocked that a group of villagers demanding clean water could be so viciously attacked.

"The government is protecting the factory," she said. She explained that the police breakup of the protest allowed water transports to enter the factory and the removal of "two container loads that could have been finished gloves." The attack on protestors, she

suggested, “may have been aimed at allowing these movements in and out the factory at management’s request.”

Another worker joined in the discussion, ridiculing media reports of “violent protestors.” The demonstration, he said, involved “unarmed men, women and even children who were chased and attacked by hundreds of security forces.”

Rajapakse’s government has attempted to exploit the death of a police officer on March 16, blaming it on villagers. One villager, however, told the SEP, that the death was an accident. It occurred when other police tried to clear the road of trees cut down by the protesting villagers. As part of the government’s attempts to intimidate villagers, murder charges have been filed against four protestors and will be heard in the Awissawella courts on Monday.

Without offering a shred of evidence, police also claimed that the Thunnana protest was an attempt to discredit the government ahead of debate in Geneva on a United Nations Human Rights Council resolution. The resolution, sponsored by the US, is about war crimes and other human rights violations committed by Colombo during its war against separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The resolution is part of Washington’s anti-China “pivot to Asia” and is an attempt to pressure the Rajapakse government to distance itself from Beijing.

Referring to tomorrow’s provincial elections, a village woman complained that since the March 16 attack, none of the major political parties was “coming here—no one is concerned about the situation in the village.”

An elderly villager said “troops wearing black uniforms roamed the village on bikes” and commented that these elite state forces were an attempt to intimidate local youth. “Youth from the village live in fear of abduction,” he said. “They cannot stay here at night.”

The SEP team explained that the villagers could only defend themselves against government repression and oppose industrial pollution by appealing to other workers in a common struggle to defend the basic rights of all working people.

SEP members outlined the campaign for the Independent Workers Inquiry into Water Pollution in Weliveriya and emphasised the importance of

extending its work to the Hanwella area. SEP leaflets were distributed explaining the inquiry and the pollution in Weliveriya. Three youth were killed in Weliveriya last year when the military opened fire on protestors.

One young Thunnana worker was keenly interested in the committee’s work and pointed to the similarity between the repression directed against water pollution demonstrators and the violence long used against Tamils in the island’s north. He asked: “Is this how these forces acted during the war [against the LTTE]?”

An HRP worker initially defended the plant. He said employees had been shown pH air pollution levels of the factory’s output and believed that the protests were “unreasonable.”

SEP team members said the Dipped Product Company was involved in a pollution cover up. They explained that a report on Weliveriya pollution by the Government Analysis Department revealed that the factory had failed to take proper precautions when emitting industrial effluent.

“The absence of an independent investigation into these allegations is an issue,” the worker said and agreed to study SEP’s election manifesto and other material on the workers’ inquiry.

Overall, there was a strong response from villagers, including financial donations and requests for further political discussions.



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