

Oppose police sabotage of SEP workers' inquiry in Sri Lanka

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)

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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka denounces the underhanded police sabotage of the party's public meeting on June 29 at the Vila Gaya Reception Hall, Weliweriya. The police issued an illegal order to the hall owner to cancel the SEP's booking, making it impossible for the meeting to go ahead. The SEP calls on the working class to oppose this attack on the basic democratic rights of our party.

The SEP organised the meeting to present the reports and conclusions of its Independent Workers Inquiry Committee (IWIC) into Weliweriya Water Pollution. The SEP formed the IWIC last November to investigate the pollution of the groundwater supply in the Weliweriya area by the Venigros Dipped Products Company. Our inquiry established important facts about the water contamination, as well as the working conditions in the factory, an army attack on protesting villagers last August and the government's role in defending the company.

The SEP booked the hall for its meeting and paid the necessary charges. The SEP and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) campaigned in the area to build the meeting and pasted posters advertising the event. An announcement was also posted on the Sinhala section of the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Last Friday morning, the hall manager informed the SEP organiser for the meeting, Ananda Wakkumbura, that an Assistant Superintendent of Police (ASP) from Gampaha, the district centre, had ordered her not to provide the hall for the SEP meeting. Under those conditions, the manager said she had to cancel the booking. When Wakkumbura visited the Gampaha police station, officers denied any knowledge of such an order.

After Wakkumbura returned to the hall on Saturday

morning, the owner declared that on Friday morning an officer from the Weliweriya police arrived and claimed that the Gampaha police wanted to talk to him about the SEP meeting. The officer rang a number from his mobile phone and gave it to the owner. The person on the other end ordered the owner not to provide the hall to the SEP. If the meeting went ahead, all participants and the owner would be arrested.

Wakkumbura spoke to the Officer In Charge (OIC) of the Weliweriya police station, who denied any involvement by his station and said the police had no objection to the SEP holding the meeting. But when the SEP demanded that a written or verbal assurance to that effect be conveyed to hall owner, the OIC refused, citing the legal point that no police clearance was needed for an in-door meeting.

On behalf of the SEP, Wakkumbura lodged a written complaint at Weliweriya police station. In response, the Weliweriya OIC sent an officer to take a statement from the hall owner, who provided a completely different story. The owner claimed that he cancelled the SEP's booking on his own accord, fearing the consequences of a political meeting that could attract a large number of people. He denied any visit by a police officer.

All the facts, however, indicate that the police, acting on orders, sabotaged the SEP's meeting by threatening the hall owner. At the same time, the police, and their superiors, were conscious that their actions were illegal and attempted to cover up their actions. Wakkumbura was kept waiting for hours at the Weliweriya police station on Saturday morning—plenty of time for the police to prevail on the hall owner to tell a different story.

Police attention was already focused on the meeting. Last week, the hall manager informed the SEP that two

police officers visited the hall to ask about the SEP meeting. She said she told them that she had accepted the booking because the SEP was a registered party and they left, claiming to be satisfied.

The police actions are the result of a political decision taken at the top levels of President Mahinda Rajapakse's government and the security establishment. On August 1 last year, the government deployed the military to suppress a protest by villagers over the contaminated groundwater, killing three youth and injuring scores of others. The government's campaign of intimidation and terror has continued, with police and company thugs used against any opposition. Many villagers remain angry at the government over its defence of the company's profits at the expense of their health.

The blatant police attack on the SEP's democratic rights, and also those of working people in the area, is a part of a broader assault on the rights of the working class and oppressed masses. On June 15, the police seized on anti-Muslim violence in Aluthgama, stirred up by the extremist Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), or Buddhist Brigade, to announce a ban on "rallies that create ethnic or religious hatred." The BBS operates under the patronage of the Rajapakse government, and the ban inevitably will be used against legitimate protests and meetings.

The Rajapakse government already has an extensive police-state apparatus, built up during decades of communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Since the LTTE's defeat in 2009, the government has boosted its anti-democratic powers and used them against mounting opposition and resistance by workers, students, fishermen and farmers to its austerity agenda.

The SEP launched the inquiry into water pollution as a means of independently mobilising workers, youth and villagers against the depredations of the Venigros company and the government. We have politically opposed the pseudo-left parties—the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and United Socialist Party (USP)—that have sought to confine villagers to the framework of parliamentary politics by promoting the illusion that the right-wing opposition United National Party (UNP) would defend their interests. By blocking an independent movement of the working class, the NSSP and USP are strengthening the hand of the Rajapakse

government.

Over the past months, the SEP and IYSSE have campaigned vigorously for the independent inquiry and assembled evidence of the company's responsibility for the groundwater pollution, the appalling conditions in its factory, and the government's responsibility for the August 1 military attack on protesting villagers. As a result, there is significant local support for the inquiry.

Last April, our inquiry committee decided to extend its scope to investigate water and air pollution in the Thunnana area around the Hanwella Rubber Products (HRP) factory, also owned by the Dipped Products Company. The SEP initiative has won growing support from Thunnana residents, who have been subjected to constant intimidation by police and company thugs.

The Rajapakse government fears that the seething anger of residents in the Weliweriya and Thunnana areas will take political expression through the independent inquiry. From the outset, the government and company have been extremely nervous about what the investigation would expose. That is why the police intervened to sabotage the SEP meeting.

This attack on the SEP should be opposed by workers and youth in Sri Lanka and internationally. The struggle for democratic rights and against corporate industrial pollution can only proceed as a part of independent political mobilisation of the working class at the head of the oppressed masses, in a fight for workers' and peasant' government. Society must be reorganised from top to bottom on socialist lines to meet the pressing needs of working people, including for clean water and decent jobs, not the profit demands of the wealthy few.



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