

Sri Lanka: Workers and youth speak about Workers Inquiry

Our correspondents
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The Independent Workers Inquiry Committee (IWIC), launched by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka into water pollution at Weliweriya, held a public meeting on July 20 to present its findings and conclusions.

The IWIC was established in response to allegations by local villagers about the Dipped Products Venigross plant and following a violent military crackdown on an anti-pollution protest in Weliweriya last August. Three young people died in the attack. The investigation was later extended to include an examination of water and air pollution by the Hanwella Rubber Products owned by same company in Thunnana, Avissawella.

The IWIC held the meeting in the Sanasa Hall in Gampaha, due to being forced to change the venue several times after the police, at the instigation of the government and the company, pressured owners to withdraw their venues. SEP political committee member and IWIC convener Vilani Peiris presented the inquiry's conclusions.

The IWIC found that Dipped Products, which owns the factories at Weliweriya and Thunnana, was responsible for water and air pollution, and that the government was behind the military and police attacks on protesters. (See: "Sri Lanka: Independent Workers Inquiry presents findings on Weliweriya water pollution")

WSWS correspondents spoke to a number of the participants after the meeting.

Darshana, a student of Kelaniya University, said: "The reports answered many of the questions developed in my mind over the issue of pollution. At the beginning, almost every media criticised the military attack [last August] and blamed the factory management for the pollution. Just after the military attack, President Rajapakse ordered the ITI [Industrial

Technology Institute] for an investigation into water pollution in Weliweriya. I thought that everything was going towards the correct direction.

"But subsequently, everybody including the government, state institutions, political parties and media took the side of factory owners. I was wondering why? Actually [IWIC] inquiry reports gave me the answer. All of them represent the same capitalist class. Through those reports and other leaflets distributed by the SEP, I have learnt how to look into the issue from the class point of view."

Darshana continued: "Now everybody is silent. People think that all the problems were over after the closure of the factory. But our problems are still there. We still drink polluted water. As the reports pointed out, we will have to suffer for years to come." He also spoke about the government's attacks on education, saying: "We cannot separate these problems. Industrial pollution and the attacks on education are also the results of the profit based system."

Alahakoon, a young resident of Thunnana, said: "On June 29, I went to Vila Gaya reception hall in Weliweriya where this meeting was initially planned. When I learnt that the meeting was postponed due to police intervention, I was very much disturbed. SEP members told me that they would hold the meeting in another place. I promised that whatever the venue and date, I would be there. Today I kept my promise."

"I have been asking myself why the police are so scared of the inquiry and the SEP's interventions. This curiosity urged me to attend this meeting."

Alahakoon explained his experience of the villagers' campaign against pollution. "Since the factory has polluted our area I thought that the factory should provide piped water at their expense to each house in the village. We fought for that demand. They provided

some water connections and then washed their hands.”

He said that over last three months he had been observing the role of all political parties and so-called environmental organisations over the pollution issue. “I noticed there was a difference in what you said and began to read your leaflets. Through those leaflets and today’s reports, I understood the root cause of industrial pollution is capitalism. In the future you can see me with you in your fight against capitalism.”

Rexi Silva, a retired worker at the Peoples’ Estate Development Board, expressed his agreement with the report presented on water pollution. “The presenter provided very strong evidence and proved how the factory has polluted water in the area,” he said.

Silva was an eye-witness to the military suppression of protesters in Weliveriya last August. “As the report pointed out, the military attack was cruel,” he said. “However, I would like to add something. When the military attacked, I noticed that there were some strange people among the protesters. They were in plain clothes and pretended to be protesters. I think that they provoked the military by pelting stones and other objects.”

The WSWs reporters explained that the government often used provocateurs as the pretext for an attack. At the same time ordinary people might have been expressing their hostility at the deployment of the military. However, more fundamental questions were involved: Why did the government ignore the peoples’ grievances? Why didn’t it carry out a proper investigation into water pollution? Why did it side with the factory owners? Finally, why did the government deploy heavily armed soldiers for such a protest?

Silva acknowledged that was correct, saying: “Actually the main issue is the military deployment. Not the other minor things such as pelting stones.”

Anna De Silva, an SEP sympathiser who works in the Middle East, recalled the previous workers’ inquiries conducted by the Revolutionary Communist League, the predecessor of the SEP. “I can remember when you held an inquiry into the death of Premelal Jayakodi, a young worker at the Korea Ceylon leather factory in the Katunayaka Free Trade Zone. You exposed how the capitalists exploited the workers without any concern for their safety.

“In that inquiry you were able to prove that, factory owners were responsible for his tragic death. Jayakodi

was forced to work at an unsafe leather cutting machine. Its broken sensors had been removed at that time. The factory owners were concerned about profits and didn’t worry about the sensor. In both inquiries, you have proved that the problem is the profit-based system of capitalism.”



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