

Sri Lankan corporate giant sues environmental activist

Vilani Peiris**14 December 2015**

One of Sri Lanka's largest business conglomerates has filed a court case against an environmental activist alleging that he defamed the company and demanding damages of 250 million rupees (\$US1.75 million).

The Dipped Products Limited (DPL) of Hayleys Group alleges that Padmasiri Weerasinghe, the president of the Organisation for the Defense of Kelani Valley, gave an interview to Neth FM radio accusing DPL's Hanwella Rubber Products factory of causing air and water contamination. The factory is located at Thunnana, 30 kilometres from Colombo.

DPL claims that by giving the interview on May 10, Weerasinghe harmed its "image and the reputation." A hearing has been scheduled for December 16.

Weerasinghe said in his interview that he based his comments on the ruling made by a magistrate on April 30 that the factory caused "public inconveniences such as water supplied by wells and water project [that] is not suitable for drinking, agricultural works are impossible, people living in the area where the factory is located suffer from various respiratory disorders and liver, stomach and related diseases, noises which has made daily works difficult."

The magistrate ordered the factory to close within two weeks. However, DPL appealed to the Avissawella High Courts, where Judge Devika Abeyratne on November 11 reversed the order. She said the magistrate had been "misled" and the court had now considered "documents produced by the state authorities," such as the Environmental Authority. Accordingly, the factory produced no pollution.

Weerasinghe told the *World Socialist Web Site* that he is willing to challenge DPL's charges with the support of local people. "I didn't defame the factory," he said. "I didn't obstruct its business affairs. What I did was describe the unsafe situation faced by the people in the

area."

Weerasinghe said he believed in the government of President Maithripla Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe but it was not solving the problems of the people.

For years, Thunnana villagers organised protests, complaining to the authorities about suspected Hanwella Rubber Products pollution. When hundreds of people demonstrated in March 2014, the police unleashed a brutal attack, injuring scores and arresting 60 people.

This was part of a record of government suppression of mass opposition to industrial pollution. In August 2013, the previous government of President Mahinda Rajapakse mobilised the army to suppress a protest against DPL's Venigross factory at Rathupaswala, near Colombo. Protesters alleged that the factory's waste water contaminated groundwater in the area and demanded the plant's removal. Three youth were killed and more than 40 were injured in the army's attack.

DPL later reluctantly shifted the Venigross factory to the Biyagama Industrial Zone. Many permanent and contract employees were sacked and new workers recruited on lower wages and worse conditions.

While the people of Weliweriya and Thunnana still experience environmental problems and suffer the loss of loved ones and injuries caused by the army and police attacks, DPL recorded its highest profit last year.

Sirisena's government, like Rajapakse's, has not conducted a proper investigation into pollution in Rathupaswala or Thunnana. Those responsible for the army violence in Rathupaswala and police attack at Thunnana have been let off the hook.

DPL's court case has broader implications. Big companies, driving for cheap labour and high profits, want to silence the opposition from workers and the

poor to industrial pollution, which is rampant in Sri Lanka.

In August, it was revealed that leaked oil from the Coca Cola factory near Colombo, located close to the Kelani River, contaminated the river and affected drinking water purifying plants. The Water Board had to stop the water supply in parts of Colombo and the suburbs for two days. Later, the company was able to avoid legal liability by paying damages to the Water Board.

The Sri Lankan representative of the International Union for Conservation of Nature, Dr Ananda Malvathanthri, told the *Sunday Times* that around 6,000 big and small factories are located along the Kelani River alone. He said his organisation was formulating ways and means to stop pollution.

Malvathanthri's remarks point to widespread pollution problems. Sirisena's government, however, has pledged to provide more investment zones for foreign and local companies, which will only aggravate the environmental damage.

In November 2013, the Socialist Equality Party launched an Independent Workers Inquiry Committee (IWIC) into water pollution in Weliweiya. Later, the IWIC extended its investigation into complaints of water and air pollution at Thunnana.

During this investigation, evidence emerged that toxic chemicals mixed with the water released by the factories could be the reason for polluted water. The investigation also revealed how the company and various government institutions, including the Environment Authority, have covered up the truth.

The IWIC concluded that the environmental disasters created by the capitalist profit system could not be prevented by trying to pressure governments to take action.

“This system cannot provide for the basic needs of the people,” the committee explained. “Instead, it is attempting to destroy all the rights won by the working class in last century. A social counter-revolution has been unleashed in every country against the working class. Industrial pollution and other disastrous conditions can only be ended through the establishment of a socialist system and production organised rationally to meet the needs of mankind, not the profits of the wealthy.”

The case against Weerasinghe is a warning to the

working class. It is part of a broader attack on the rights of the working people and the poor under conditions where the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government is trying to attract investment by offering greater concessions to big business, preparing to seek another bailout loan from International Monetary Fund and implementing more austerity measures.



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