SEP (Sri Lanka) calls for workers' inquiry into Meethotamulla garbage dump disaster

The Socialist Equality Party
9 May 2017

The Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) call for an independent workers' inquiry into the catastrophe caused by the collapse of Colombo's main garbage dump in the suburb of Meethotamulla.

On April 14, a large portion of the Meethotamulla rubbish heap collapsed, destroying 146 houses and killing 32 people, with an equal number believed to still be missing. Over 150 families have been displaced and forced to live in temporary shelters in neighbouring areas with few or no amenities. Scores of injured have been treated at hospitals across Colombo.

Confronted by growing anger among the residents and others concerned about human lives and welfare, President Maithripala Sirisena appointed a retired judge, Chandradasa Nanayakkara, to conduct an investigation into the causes of the calamity. Establishing commissions of inquiry, after allowing disasters to happen, is simply a means for covering up the government's own responsibility and diverting mass discontent.

The SEP warns that the government inquiry will whitewash those responsible—above all successive capitalist governments—for the criminal negligence that caused the loss of lives of workers and youth and the destruction of the homes of former Meethotamulla residents.

A parliamentary debate that was announced with much hype by both the government and the so-called joint opposition ended as a complete sham. The debate was such a farce that the *Daily Mirror* editorial on May 3 declared: "Now that the debate is over what has the country achieved from it? Neither the government nor the parties in the Opposition suggested any specific short-term or long-term solutions to the problem."

The outcome is an indictment of the entire political establishment. The parliamentary system is itself just a worn-out cover for the oppressive rule of the capitalist class and does not in any way represent the needs of working people.

The urgent necessity is for an independent investigation by the working class to reveal the actual causes of the disaster and recommend genuine solutions to deal with the crimes of the capitalist class and its governments.

The SEP and IYSSE call for, and will establish, a committee for an independent inquiry that will bring working people, youth, socially-conscious intellectuals and professionals to work together to draw up an economic, social and political program to address the burning problems facing the masses.

A workers' inquiry into the garbage problem will not only propose concrete scientific solutions to that particular problem. It will elaborate a political perspective for the working class to win the support of urban and rural poor people to find sustainable solutions to all the social and democratic problems they confront under capitalism.

The SEP has experience in holding such investigations. Of its three previous inquiries, the most recent was into the gunning down of demonstrators protesting against water pollution caused by the Venigros latex factory in the Rathupaswala area in 2013. President Mahinda Rajapakse's regime was in power at that time and mobilised the security forces against people who were demanding clean drinking water.

That workers' inquiry won broad support from working people and youth in the area. Despite many obstructions by the Venigros factory owners and the Rajapakse government, the inquiry committee successfully conducted its proceedings and produced a report exposing the criminal operations of the factory in collusion with the government.

The proposed workers' inquiry into the Meethotamulla disaster will investigate the following:

- The history of the Meethotamulla garbage dump and the socio-economic problems that it has caused
- What factors triggered the April 14 collapse
- The available techniques for scientific solid waste management and why they were not applied

© World Socialist Web Site

• The international context of the solid waste problem as part of the social counter-revolution being waged by the ruling classes

• The role of the media and so-called environmentalists in the Meethotamulla catastrophe

• The role of the establishment political parties, particularly the pseudo-left organisations

• The alternative political and social program that must be adopted by the working class

The open dumping of garbage, without scientific management, took place for 22 years in the 16-acre wetland plot in Meethotamulla. Both the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) ruled the country during that period, with the support of the pseudo-left groups and trade unions. However, the Meethotamulla garbage tip grew rapidly from 2009 onward when open dumping at a former site in Blumenthal had to be discontinued due to a fire and subsequent court ruling. Meethotamulla became Colombo's main garbage disposal facility.

At Meethotamulla, the garbage heap grew well over 30 metres in height, posing a critical health and environmental threat, not only to local residents, but to the entire city. Dozens of people living near the dump, including children, have died due to various pollution-related and vector-borne diseases. Waterways in the area have been turned black by the leachate seeping from garbage. Noxious gases emitting from the dump can be detected as far away as four kilometres.

The area's residents are predominantly low-paid workers and the urban poor. Most are forced to live in tiny shanty quarters shared by two or three families due to the acute housing crisis in Colombo. Some residents are evictees displaced by the government's ruthless program to drive out over 70,000 poor families from parts of Colombo, in order to make way for private investment and "city beautification" projects.

On many occasions in recent years, people have vigorously protested against the danger posed by the Meethotamulla rubbish dump. In early 2014, the Rajapakse government launched a violent police attack on residents who engaged in a sit-in for several days to block garbage dumping.

The pseudo-left groups exploited the issue to urge residents to vote against Rajapakse during the January 2015 presidential election. But, the problem only continued to fester after Sirisena took office and formed a government with UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister. The response of the current "national unity" government to local protests has been nothing but brutal police attacks and arrests.

The entire political establishment has attempted to blame the Meethotamulla disaster on the victims themselves, asserting that they did not leave the area, despite it being declared a danger zone and being offered compensation. The residents have categorically rejected these claims.

The health and environmental hazards created by mismanaged solid waste are an international problem. Just weeks before the Meethotamulla catastrophe, a similar garbage dump collapse in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, killed 113 residents. In 2005, more than 200 waste pickers were killed in Guatemala City in Central America. A 2016 fire in the 326-acre Deonar dump in Mumbai, India, whose thick smoke plumes could be seen from outer space, caused an air pollution alert of regional proportions.

These problems are direct consequences of decades of attacks on public services in both developing and advanced capitalist countries. They have been aggravated by the savage austerity agenda being imposed on the working class globally. However, the pseudo-left groups, including the Frontline Socialist Party, the Nava Sama Samaja Party and the United Socialist Party, have not stopped engaging in hollow protests and making futile appeals to the same ruling class parties that are responsible for the devastation that occurred on April 14.

The SEP calls on the residents of Colombo and workers, youth, students and conscientious intellectuals in Sri Lanka and worldwide to support the independent workers' inquiry into the Meethotamulla disaster. It will be an important first step to find a solution to the solid waste crisis, as well as to lay the political basis for a social transformation that ensures safe and decent living conditions for all.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site