

Independent Inquiry Committee holds meeting on Sri Lankan garbage dump collapse

Our correspondent
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The Independent Workers Inquiry Committee (IWIC) investigating the social disaster caused by the collapse of Colombo's main garbage dump in the suburb of Meethotamulla, held a public meeting in the area this week as part of a campaign to build support for the inquiry among workers and young people.

The waste dump collapsed on April 14, killing at least 32 people. Another eight people remain "missing," while a total of 146 families were affected. Most of those whose dwellings were destroyed have not been provided with new houses.

The disaster amounted to social murder, for which the Sri Lankan government is responsible. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) called for an independent inquiry by the working class to investigate the circumstances that led to the collapse.

P. Aravinda, an SEP member who chaired the meeting, said the real number of deaths is still unknown. "Governments, past and present, and their high officials are responsible for this social catastrophe," he stated. "People had demonstrated since 2011, demanding that the garbage mountain be removed. The government's response was to suppress the protests with police attacks."

Aravinda explained that the government and the establishment media were protecting the real culprits responsible for the collapse and blaming ordinary people. In opposition to this campaign, the IWIC, he explained, will seek to expose the class roots of the disaster, which has underscored the vast growth of social inequality.

Speaking in Tamil, SEP member Fareeda Imran said that working people and the poor all around the world are vulnerable to disasters like that which occurred at

Meethotamulla, as a result of the gutting of social spending.

Imran referred to the inferno that engulfed Grenfell Tower in London last June. The fire killed at least 80 working class people, with fears that the real death toll is far higher.

"The reason for the fire was a lack of proper safety measures and the dangerous condition of the building," Imran said. "British governments and their officialdoms have wanted to chase poor residents from the area, which is inhabited by the ultra-wealthy."

Similarly, she noted, the Colombo government is evicting poor people from shanty-towns and tiny dwellings, to release land for investors and property developers to build luxury condominium, hotels and leisure parks for the rich.

SEP Political Committee member Vilani Peiris detailed the culpability of successive governments for the Meethotamulla disaster. "From 2009 onwards, they created dire conditions in the Meethotamulla area by dumping 800–1,200 tons of garbage every day. People opposed this and even some environmental experts issued warnings about the dangerous consequences," she stated.

These warnings, however, were suppressed and concealed by the government. "That is why we are charging that this was a deliberately prepared disaster," Peiris said. "The government's plan is to evacuate people from this area and grab the land for investors."

Peiris noted that the government was seeking to cover up its responsibility and clamp down on mounting anger. It has repeatedly deployed police to attack protests against unsafe garbage dumping.

At the same time, Peiris explained that the deadly

dengue epidemic has been intensified due to spending cuts and unsafe garbage disposal, affecting hundreds of thousands of people.

Peiris exposed the claims of the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) and other pseudo-left groups that the social crisis can be resolved through protest appeals to the government. The FSP has discussed filing court cases over the disaster. Peiris explained that these would be aimed at concealing the political issues raised by the garbage collapse, and diverting anger behind the official parliamentary set-up.

Peiris reviewed the record of the Trotskyists in Sri Lanka, who fought for social rights by mobilising the working class independently in the 1940s and 1950s.

The Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), however, betrayed this struggle, joining a capitalist coalition government with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in 1964. This paved the way for the United National Party (UNP) to come to power and implement free market policies that led to the destruction of the social gains won through earlier struggles.

Peiris concluded by explaining that all of the capitalist parties were committed to making the working class pay for the deepening economic crisis, by imposing the austerity dictates of the International Monetary Fund.

“No solutions can be found within the capitalist system,” Peiris said. “Initial steps to mobilise the massive funds needed for social services can only go ahead by nationalising the major companies, plantations and banks under workers control, and repudiating foreign debts.” It was necessary to fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement these policies as part of the struggle for international socialism.

In a discussion after the meeting, a housewife said the previous government of President Mahinda Rajapakse informed residents that land was required for development and that they should move from the area. “Our house was built by me and my five children,” she said. “We were asked to go to a flat costing 100,000 rupees. It is very small, so we did not want to go.”

The woman said that she still lives near the disaster site with her family, where an explosion of the garbage mountain or a fire could produce another tragedy. “There is no talk about giving us a new house,” she said. “They say we are unauthorised residents. Is it not

the government’s responsibility to provide housing for the citizens of the country?”

Another housewife, Kumudu said some residents had seen Athureliye Rathanasara, a monk and pro-government MP, spray a chemical on the garbage mountain which he claimed would help it decompose more rapidly. Rathanasara allegedly did this less than two weeks before the disaster, prompting Kumudu to raise the possibility that it could have contributed to the collapse.

“Decomposed garbage mixed with water has contaminated the nearby Kelani River,” Kumudu added. “We are told by the authorities that even Buddhist alms giving festivals should not be organised. So what about our day-to-day meals? We saw dengue affected people, including little children, who were dying.”

Kumudu commented: “Champika Ranawaka [Cabinet Minister of Megapolis] tried to convert this area into a Green Park by bulldozing us. We are going to be chased away, with the government declaring that we have built our houses in unauthorised lands. But we have lived here since our childhood days. We are not ready to die under this garbage mountain.”



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