

The Sri Lankan garbage disaster: A crime of capitalism

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October 14 marked six months since the collapse of a huge garbage dump in Meethotamulla, a suburb in Sri Lanka's capital city, Colombo. At least 32 people died after being buried alive. Eight remain missing and more than 100 were injured.

Some 198 families, numbering around 1,000 people, were affected and 146 houses were damaged. The victims have been abandoned by the government, which has offered only token compensation and provided small houses, without decent facilities, for a handful of families.

The disaster was not an isolated incident or an accident, but the result of the criminal policies of successive governments, aimed at boosting corporate profits, including through the gutting of social spending. Under capitalism, such tragedies have become a fact of daily life, including throughout the Indian subcontinent.

On September 1, another garbage mountain collapsed at Ghazipur in the Indian district of East Delhi, killing two people and injuring five others. A fire broke out at the collapse site on October 14, frightening nearby residents.

Opened in 1984, Ghazipur's landfill had reached a height of 50 metres before the collapse, well in excess of the official 20-metre limit. The site encompasses almost 70 acres or 28 hectares.

The landfill is owned by a private company, without certification from the Delhi Pollution Control Committee. Around 3,000 metric tons were being dumped there every day. It collapsed after several days of heavy rain due to the sheer weight of the debris. The fire last month was triggered by methane gas produced by decomposing garbage.

After the September 1 tragedy, the Delhi regional administration banned protests demanding the dump be closed.

The site is located in an impoverished area where tens of thousands live in tiny houses in crowded shanty-towns. Reportedly, around 1,500 families in the area are involved

in fossicking through the rubbish to earn a pittance. In India, there are an estimated 1.7 million families working as garbage collectors.

After the disaster, a resident told the *Hindustan Times*: "Perhaps nowhere in the city are people facing the health hazards that we face. There is a landfill, next to it a fish market, a slaughterhouse—all sources of never-ending stench."

The *Civil Engineer* web site noted: "Mulla Colony village residents [near the Ghazipur site] said that water, air and soil pollution from open landfill has robbed them their health. They are forced to keep their windows shut, as the air is contaminated with fine particulate matter and the smell is unbearable and many have developed respiratory diseases."

To appease public anger, Area Governor Anil Bajjal formally banned garbage dumping on September 4, but it is continuing. There are similar waste sites in Delhi, including at Bhalaswa and Okhla. Kolkata in West Bengal and Mumbai in Maharashtra also reportedly have hazardous garbage sites.

It took three days to extinguish a blaze that began on October 19 at a massive waste dump in the Gujarat city of Ahmadabad. Fires are frequent at the site, with toxic smoke often reported as far as three kilometres away.

These oppressive conditions puncture the claims of successive Indian governments, including the current administration, of social progress based on economic growth. In reality, millions of workers and peasants live in unsafe conditions, while corporations made huge profits.

The situation is the same on the African continent.

In Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital, at least 115 bodies were recovered after a garbage dump collapsed on March 16. Another 80 people remain unaccounted for.

The city is a hub of development projects for the rich, with new high-rise shopping malls, luxury hotels and housing complexes. Tens of thousands of poor people

have been cleared out to make way for the projects, with many, including the victims of the garbage collapse, forced onto the outskirts of the city.

A World Bank report in April noted that around the world, waste generation rates are rising. In 2012, the world's cities generated 1.3 billion tonnes of solid waste, a figure that is expected to rise to 2.2 billion by 2025.

The report stated: "Compared to those in developed nations, residents in developing countries, especially the urban poor, are more severely impacted by unsustainably managed waste." It warned that "unregulated dumps disposed or openly burned will create serious health, safety, and environmental consequences."

The austerity agenda demanded by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) ensures that government expenditure is being slashed in areas of social need, effectively blocking any real solution to the garbage crisis.

Today, amid a deepening global crisis of capitalism, "third world" conditions are emerging in so-called developed countries. In London in June, a fire tore through the Grenfell Tower building, killing at least 79 people. The disaster created by flammable cladding was a product of criminal negligence on the part of the British ruling elite.

Thousands of families in the US town of Flint, Michigan are victims of a lead-polluted water system.

The Independent Workers Inquiry, called by the Socialist Equality Party, is examining the Meethotamulla garbage disaster in this international context.

Unsafe garbage dumping on natural marshy land in the Colombo suburb of Meethotamulla began in 1987. Over the following decades, it developed into a huge mountain covering nine hectares and exceeding 60 metres in height. People warned governments about the impending disaster but protests were suppressed with police violence, arrests and frame-ups.

The current minister of megapolis and western development, Patali Champika Ranawaka, has explicitly rejected safe waste disposal. "It costs between 7 to 10 rupees [around 7 US cents] to recycle a kilo of waste. No one has funds for that," he recently declared.

The real issue is not a lack of funds. Successive governments have enabled the banks, financial institutions and major corporations to amass billions of rupees in profits, by plundering the wealth of society.

The garbage disaster, like every other social issue, is not simply the result of bad individuals. We are living through a systemic crisis of capitalism which is propelling

governments in the "advanced" and "developing" countries to dismantle what little remains of public infrastructure and social spending.

The pseudo-left organisations seek to block an understanding of this fundamental fact among ordinary people. They promote the lie that the social devastation being inflicted on the working class and poor can be resolved by placing pressure on capitalist governments.

In Sri Lanka, the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) has for years sought to divert anger over the Meethotamulla garbage dump into impotent appeals to successive governments. This is in line with their broader efforts to block the emergence of an independent movement of the working class.

Enormous resources are required to guarantee the basic social rights of the working class, including to live and work in safe, healthy conditions. This includes the closure of hazardous garbage sites and the development of rationally-planned waste disposal. Those resources can be mobilised only through the overthrow of the capitalist system, and the establishment of a workers' and peasants' government that would enact socialist policies, including placing the banks and the major corporations under public ownership and democratic workers' control.

The SEP has called the Independent Workers Inquiry to develop the political consciousness required by the working class for the revolutionary tasks that it confronts. The SEP appeals to workers and youth to join this struggle.



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