

Sri Lankan workers' inquiry presents findings on Meethotamulla garbage disaster

Our correspondents
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The Independent Workers' Inquiry Committee (IWIC) on the Meethotamulla rubbish dump disaster released its findings at a public meeting in Colombo on April 1. The massive garbage site, located in Kolonnawa on the western outskirts Colombo, collapsed on April 14, 2017, killing at least 32 people, destroying 146 houses and impacting on thousands of residents.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) initiated the IWIC last May to investigate the tragedy and why it occurred. Nearly 100 people attended the April 1 meeting, including some of those directly affected by the catastrophe, as well as workers, youth, housewives and SEP members.

The meeting began with a screening of an IWIC documentary featuring protests by local residents, calling for the removal of the site before the disaster, the devastating aftermath of the collapse, and interviews with victims and local residents.

IWIC convener Vilani Peiris told the meeting that President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe had addressed none of the key issues facing local residents and survivors in the 12 months since the tragedy.

Nor had the government done anything to prevent future catastrophes in the area, Peiris added. Compensation payments were a pittance and only made to those whose homes were destroyed. The dwellings provided to 90 affected families were "unsuitable for decent living."

SEP political committee member Kapila Fernando explained that the Kolonnawa Local Council commenced garbage disposal at the site in 1987 and expanded it in 2009 to include garbage from across Colombo. Ignoring a court order limiting the site to two acres, it was quickly expanded to 23 acres.

Following the military defeat of the secessionist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009, then-President Mahinda Rajapakse announced plans to convert Colombo into an international commercial hub. The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government expanded the plan, and evicted hundreds of poor families from potentially valuable real estate in inner Colombo.

Residents first began protesting about the garbage dump when it was 10 feet high. The government suppressed these demonstrations and the mountain continued to grow, in violation of all environmental laws, to a height of about 200 feet.

Another SEP leader, Pradeep Ramanayake, told the meeting that last year's collapse was not "a natural disaster." It was caused by "continuous dumping of garbage in a densely populated area."

Citing information by geologist R. M. S. Bandara, from Sri Lanka's National Building Research Organisation, Ramanayake said massive pressure from millions of tons of garbage on a weak soil layer caused a landslide. The wetland area, he explained, was unsuitable for garbage disposal but no feasibility study on the location was ever conducted.

SEP political committee member Lasitha Lakmal said the Meethotamulla landslide was one of numerous catastrophes created by uncontrolled garbage dumping. He referred to the deaths of 200 people in July 2000 when a Quezon City dump in Manila, Philippines collapsed, a 2014 February garbage site slide in Bandung, Indonesia, and ongoing garbage dump problems in Mumbai and other Indian cities.

These disasters occurred where the poor were forced to live, the speaker said, and had become commonplace, in both poor and developed countries, created by decades of government cost-cutting and the drive for profit. Lakmal referred to the city of Flint in

the US where residents were forced to drink lead-contaminated water, and to the massive fire in the multi-storey Grenfell apartment block in London, which killed more than 70 working-class people in June 2017.

A further SEP speaker, Pani Wijesiriwardena said scientific solid waste management methods and other key issues, such as population density, drainage and soil stability, were ignored at Meethotamulla. Combined solid waste management concepts developed in the 1980s, reduction of toxic gas generation in dumps, or recycling and power generation, had not been considered by authorities in any Sri Lankan major townships, he said.

Financial allocations for such approaches, Wijesiriwardena continued, had been systematically gutted and infrastructure was severely lacking. In 2016, he said, only 334 million rupees was provided to local government bodies for garbage management.

SEP political committee member Rohantha de Silva reviewed the response of the establishment political parties and the pseudo-left. The ruling-class parties were totally indifferent to the fate of ordinary people and had attempted to suppress all demands for healthy and safe living conditions and social rights, he said.

Likewise, pseudo-left groups, such as the United Socialist Party and the Nava Sama Samaja Party, functioned as appendages of the government, maintaining a complete silence about those politically responsible for the Meethotamulla catastrophe.

De Silva said protests organised by the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) were aimed at diverting the popular opposition to the garbage dump into pointless appeals to successive governments and covering up the fact that the underlying reason for the disaster was the capitalist profit system.

SEP member Dehin Wasantha noted the role of the establishment media and various environmental organisations. Government-controlled publications such as the *Daily News* and the *Dinamina* published editorials and comments attempting to blame poverty-stricken Meethotamulla residents for the death toll because they had not moved away from the site before the catastrophe.

Concluding the meeting, Peiris pointed out that other reports—by a presidential commission, Japanese experts and Peradeniya University scholars—had never been made public. These “investigations” sought to conceal

the real culprits and abandon the suffering survivors and their families to their own fate.

Peiris said the situation facing residents living near other garbage sites, such as Karadiyana, Guhagoda and Dompe, was not much different. She explained how successive governments reacted to popular protests against garbage dumps. In May 2015, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government deployed police, who used high-pressure water cannons to disperse demonstrators.

Politicians promised to solve the garbage problems but did nothing, Peiris said. That was why the Meethotamulla disaster was a social crime, created by capitalism and its political servants, and the drive for profit.

The IWIC convenor said workers and the poor had to reject every political faction of the ruling class and build their own action committees to prevent future disasters, improve living conditions and defend their basic social rights. These had to be fighting organisations to mobilise workers and rally peasants, youth, students and other oppressed layers on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program, she said.

Billions of rupees were required to provide decent housing, jobs and health care and education, Peiris said. “That is why estates, banks and large corporations should be nationalised under workers’ control and production organised not for the profits of a few but for the benefit of the vast majority.”



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