

In act of state terror

# Indian police kill 12 protesting industrial pollution in Tuticorin, Tamil Nadu

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Police have killed at least 12 protesters in Tuticorin, in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, in a brutal crackdown on mass opposition to a copper smelter that has spewed hazardous industrial waste into the area for decades, causing numerous fatalities.

Ten protesters, including two women, were killed Tuesday and more than 60 others injured when police opened fire on a crowd of 20,000 that had defied a government ban on gatherings of more than four people. Yesterday, when opponents of the smelter took to the streets of Tuticorin to denounce Tuesday's state violence, police again resorted to gunfire, killing a further protester.

Tamil Nadu's chief minister, the head of the Tamil Nadu regionalist AIADMK, Edappadi Palaniswami, has justified the bloody police repression. "The police," declared Palaniswami, "had to take action under unavoidable circumstances to protect public life and property."

H. Raja, the national secretary of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Hindu supremacist party that dominates India's national government, has also endorsed the shooting down of people who were demanding the closure of a facility, owned by a billionaire Indian industrialist, that has wreaked havoc on the lives of the people of Tuticorin, as well as fishermen along a large swathe of India's south-east coast. The police had "no other option," claimed Raja, because the protests had "turned into violence." The AIADMK is a close ally of the BJP, although not formally part of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance.

The killings have provoked revulsion and anger across India. Fearing mass social unrest, the Tamil Nadu state government has ordered all internet access shut down for five days in Thoothukudi (the district in which Tuticorin is situated) and in the neighbouring districts of Tirunelveli and Kanniyakumari.

In his letter to internet providers ordering the shutdown, state Home Secretary Niranjan Mardi said Tuesday's "mass gathering of people was achieved mainly through the information passed via social media." He claimed "anti-social elements" were now seeking to "exploit the situation" by sending "provocative messages."

According to *Hindu*, the Chemicals Department, a level alert has been sounded across Tamil Nadu, with intelligence agencies warning of possible attacks on public transport and sabotage of railway tracks in the backdrop of State-wide protests planned by political parties, fishermen and others."

These "warnings" strongly suggest that further state violence is being prepared. For its part, the BJP central government has placed the para-military Central Reserve Police Force on standby for possible deployment in Tamil Nadu.

The Tamil Nadu government and police have blamed "outside agitators" and "leftists" for Tuesday's murderous violence, claiming that they incited the protesters to run amok. In fact, everything suggests the authorities deliberately provoked a bloody confrontation.

Acting on a complaint filed by Vedanta Resources, the transnational corporation that owns the Tuticorin copper smelter, a Madras High Court judge declared last Friday that Tuesday's protest—which was to mark the 100th day of an agitation for the permanent closure of the smelter—was "likely to trigger a law and order situation." He then went on to recommend that the District Collector outlaw the protest by invoking Section 144 of the criminal code, an authoritarian British colonial statute. This the Collector promptly did.

The AIADMK government mobilized 1,500 police, bringing in security forces from outside Tuticorin, with the intention of violently suppressing Tuesday's "illegal" protest. Acting according to plan, police, virtually from the get-go, set upon the demonstrators, attacking them with lathis (truncheons) and tear gas. When the protesters pushed back, the police resorted to live bullets and, in violation of their own "standing orders and guidelines," did so without warning and with lethal intent.

The head of the People's Union for Civil Liberties, V. Suresh, has pointed to video and eyewitness evidence that indicates police deliberately sought to kill protesters. "Standing atop police vehicles," police snipers shot "directly at people leading the march, aiming to kill them," charged Suresh yesterday.

Adding insult to injury, the Tamil Nadu government is now

offering the victims of Tuesday's police violence derisory "compensation." The families of the dead are to be given 1 million rupees (less than US \$15,000), those with "serious injuries" (about \$4,400), and the other injured 100,000 rupees or about \$1,460.

While defending to the hilt the police's actions, the AIADMK government has ordered a phony inquiry into Tuesday's events that will be presided over by a High Court judge.

India's courts, like the rest of India's state apparatus and political establishment, have given Vedanta and its multi-billionaire boss, Anil Agrawal, the greenlight to spew toxic waste from the Sterlite copper smelter for decades.

The local population has been loudly complaining about the Sterlite smelter's adverse environmental impact since it opened, in the mid-1990s, only to be faced with a wall of official indifference and opposition.

Indeed, Indian authorities have approved Vedanta's plan to double the smelter's production capacity from 400,000 to 800,000 tonnes per year.

Toxic arsenic, lead, sulphur dioxide and other emissions from the smelter have poisoned the local groundwater, led to a huge spike in respiratory illness in the immediate vicinity of the smelter, and had a devastating impact on pearl harvesting and fishing off the shores of southeastern Tamil Nadu.

Flouting a mass of evidence, Vedanta and successive Tamil Nadu governments have insisted the smelter is not an environmental hazard. But a 2008 study of more 80,000 people living in a 5-kilometer radius of the smelter found that 13.9 percent of them suffered from respiratory diseases due to "the presence of gas, mixture of gases and particulate matter."

In 1996, 1999 and 2013, the Sterlite smelter was ordered shut down after its sulphur dioxide emissions were shown to have greatly exceeded minimal environmental standards. Each time, the authorities connived with Vedanta to quickly resume production.

In 2013, India's Supreme Court set aside a lower court order halting production and instead ordered Sterlite to pay a paltry fine of 1 billion rupees, or about US\$15 million.

Due to low wages and India's lax and largely unenforced environmental standards, the Sterlite facility is said to be among the world's most profitable copper smelters.

The agitation against the Sterlite smelter is part of a mounting wave of social struggles across India, involving workers in India's new globally-connected automotive and other industries, the urban and rural poor, and student youth.

While the Indian elite, foreign investors and western media celebrate India's purported "rise", the vast majority of the country's 1.3 billion people eke out an existence on \$2 a day or less. A quarter-century of "pro-market" reform has transformed India into one of the world's more unequal and socially polarized societies. The top 1 percent of India's population appropriates almost a quarter of all income and owns 60

percent of the country's total wealth.

But India's capitalist elite, like its counterparts the world over, is anxious—fearful of opposition from below and the growing disfunction of its own system, which is fueling an ever more frenzied and violent struggle for market, profits and geopolitical advantage.

Four years ago, it brought the BJP, led by the Hindu "strongman" Narendra Modi, to power to pursue a more confrontational policy against the working class and more aggressively assert its great-power ambitions.

The Modi government has accelerated pro-investor reforms, including gutting environmental regulations and introducing a new "term-employment" category under which employers can lay off workers at will and without any compensation. It has effectively transformed India into a frontline state in US military-strategic offensive against China and it has systematically promoted Hindu communalism in an attempt to divide and weaken working class opposition to its ultra-right-wing agenda.

Earlier this month, former Indian National Security Advisor M.K. Narayanan urged India's leader to beware a developing "storm" of social opposition. "Protests and agitations have a life of their own," wrote Narayanan, "and underestimating their potential could be cause for grief."

What has prevented this mounting opposition from taking the form of a working class political challenge to the Modi government and Indian capitalism are the treacherous policies pursued by the Stalinist parliamentary parties and trade unions. For decades the Stalinists have functioned as part of the political establishment, systematically suppressing the class struggle. They have responded to the bourgeoisie's embrace of the BJP and reaction by lurching still further to the right and pursuing an alliance with the Congress Party, the Indian bourgeoisie's traditional party of government and the party that over the past quarter-century spearheaded both neo-liberal reform and India's "global strategic partnership" with Washington.

In response to the events in Tuticorin, the Stalinists have called for joint protests with the Congress Party, its regional ally, the DMK, and other right-wing bourgeois parties that have connived in allowing Vedanta to amass a fortune while destroying the lives and livelihoods of people in southeast Tamil Nadu.



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