Fearful of widening mass anger over police shootings

Indian authorities shut down polluting copper plant in Tuticorin

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Facing mass anger over Tuesday's police killing of at least 13 people, and the wounding over 100 others, who demonstrated against Vedanta Resources' Sterlite copper smelter in Tuticorin, Tamil Nadu state authorities have shut down the polluting facility. A Madras High Court also halted the company's plans to double production from the current level of 400,000 tonnes per year.

Late Wednesday, the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board (TNPCB) ordered the closure and disconnection of power supplies to the smelter. The ruling was implemented early Thursday morning.

The TNPCB officially attributed its decision to a May 18-19 inspection by an environmental engineer. He reported that the company was preparing to resume production, despite a previous board order to halt production in April, pending extension of environmental clearance. The TNPCB decision, however, is a clear attempt by state authorities to contain public outrage over the police attack.

Street demonstrations were held in Tuticorin on Wednesday over the police killings the previous day. Police officers again opened fire on protestors, killing one person and injuring others. On Thursday, the protests spread to Bengalaru, capital of neighbouring state of Karnataka, with hundreds chanting slogans against the police attacks.

Tuticorin residents have opposed the Sterlite smelter since it opened in 1996. Indian authorities have ignored these concerns and allowed the facility to keep operating, despite irrefutable evidence it is poisoning the environment. On the occasions when authorities have ordered shut downs over toxic waste, the government has allowed the plant to soon reopen.

The latest wave of protests began in February. Residents demanded permanent closure of the plant over its dumping of toxic waste, including arsenic, lead and sulphur dioxide, which is poisoning groundwater and creating fatal health problems.

Tamil Nadu chief minister Edappadi Palaniswami, from the regionalist AIADMK (All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam), cynically declared on Wednesday the government was "taking all steps to close the Sterlite plant." He continued to defend the police killing of protestors, however, claiming the demonstrations were instigated by opposition parties.

"It is because of this instigation that so many people have died. And we are really saddened by the deaths," Palaniswami said. A day earlier, he told the media the police brutality was "unavoidable" in order to "protect public life and property."

Indian billionaire Anil Agarwal, who has a 71 percent share in Vedanta Resources, attempted to whip up Indian nationalism against those opposing the smelter. The campaign, he declared, was a "foreign conspiracy" to keep India reliant on imports.

The mass opposition to the smelter is a part of growing social struggles by workers, youth and rural toilers throughout India against the central and state governments and company attacks on jobs, working and living conditions.

Sections of the Indian ruling elite fear that the violent state crackdown in Tuticorin will intensify already volatile social tensions to uncontrollable levels.

A *Hindustan Times* editorial on May 23 warned: "The Tamil Nadu government's handling of the situation, its inability to gauge the mood of the people and its disregard for their concerns is worrying … Even

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now, the government is trying to downplay the seriousness of the situation and justify the police action as being due to the protests turning violent."

Similar concerns were raised yesterday in a *Hindu* editorial. Entitled "Thoothukudi [Tuticorin] firing: entirely preventable," the English-language daily declared: "[T]he Tamil Nadu government failed to gauge the intensity of what was coming. It is a tragic irony that such an angry and violent demonstration could have been staged at a time when the plant is not operational and after the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board refused to renew its consent to operate."

Official parliamentary parties like Congress, the traditional ruling party of the Indian bourgeoisie, and the DMK (Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam), a rival Tamil Nadu regional party, are trying to exploit public revulsion over the police assaults. Their efforts have nothing to do with residents' health and living conditions. They are seeking to boost their electoral fortunes against the ruling AIADMK state government and the central Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) administration, which faces national elections next year.

Yesterday, DMK president M.K. Stalin joined other opposition party leaders in protesting outside the secretariat in Chennai, the Tamil Nadu capital. He and Congress leaders were taken into custody by the police.

The DMK and other parties called a *bandh* (general shut down) today over the police killings. While workers, youths and rural toilers throughout Tamil Nadu will join today's demonstrations and statewide strike, the DMK, Congress and other opposition parties are trying to divert the mass anger into harmless political channels.

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