India: Victims of police attack on Tuticorin protests speak out

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World Socialist Web Site reporters recently visited the southern Indian coastal city of Tuticorin to speak with victims of a police attack on a mass demonstration against the Sterlite copper smelter. The plant has spewed hazardous industrial waste for decades, causing numerous deaths and other health problems.

On May 22, about 20,000 workers, youth and local residents marched to the District Collector's (government agent) office to demand the smelter's immediate shut down. It was the 100th day of continuous protests about the facility, run by a subsidiary of Vedanta Resources, a transnational corporation.

Police responded by firing indiscriminately into the crowd, killing 13 people and injuring another 100. In an attempt to silence opposition to the smelter and the brutal attack, police have carried out night raids on homes, interrogating and arresting "suspects."

Many local people have sought shelter in nearby temples. An unknown number of people have been jailed in the past month and a half.

Tuticorin police have also taken legal action against participants in a June 23 public meeting called by the Stalinist Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM) on the issue. They have filed a case against the participants, charging them with violating court directives on the conduct of the meeting.

After the police refused to allow the planned meeting, organisers approached the High Court and were eventually granted permission to hold the event. The court ruling, however, was anti-democratic: the meeting could be attended only by 1,000 people, and only two people could address the event, which had to be held between 6 p.m. and 8 p.m.

The Stalinist CPM, which is part of the Indian political establishment, opposes any independent mobilisation of the working class. Together with its ally, the Communist Party of India (CPI), the CPM is working to divert mass anger over police killing and politically subordinate it to Congress, the traditional ruling party of the Indian bourgeoisie, Dravida Munnethra Kazhagam (DMK), and other regional bourgeois parties.

Following the May 22 massacre, the CPM and CPI called for joint protests with the Congress and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), a Tamil Nadu-based party, which previously conspired to allow Vedanta to extract lucrative profits at the expense of the lives and livelihoods of local residents.

WSWS reporters visited Tuticorin hospital to interview wounded survivors of the police attack and then travelled toward Threspuram village to meet other victims. They were followed by four police, who later raided the home of one of the residents who spoke with the WSWS.

Confronted with deep-seated opposition to the smelter and the police attack, the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) state government in Tamil Nadu has ordered the facility's closure (see: "Indian authorities shut down polluting copper plant in Tuticorin"). The ongoing police intimidation, however, indicates that the government may allow the plant to reopen.

At the hospital, injured protestors took copies of WSWS articles on the police massacre and voiced their anger against the state authorities.

Thangam, 35, a caterer at a private school, had been involved in the protest for 40 days. "I consciously joined the protest because the Sterlite plant had impacted on many local people and caused cancer, asthma and other breathing problems," she said. "A little girl died of cancer near my neighbourhood. There are several cases of small children being affected by Sterlite toxic materials.

"Police attacked everyone brutally. Some politicians said we were terrorists but we were just fighting to defend our rights. Police ignored the fact that we were women and violently manhandled us. My hand was severely fractured but GH [government hospital] authorities paid no heed to the many severely injured people and very quickly discharged them, even before their wounds had healed."

Thangam was furious that most of the injured people were compelled to go back to their home towns, to be treated at

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their own expense. “Of the 105 people admitted to the hospital, only 10 were allowed to stay longer and they were all physically disabled.

“The government’s compensation was very low and I’ve not yet received any compensation,” Thangam said. “If Sterlite was to reopen we would fight against it. I’ll recover in ten months but many of those here were maimed in the police attack and are in a critical condition.”

Thangam spoke about the financial difficulties facing her family: “My salary is 5,000 rupees [$US73 a month] and my husband is a three-wheeler taxi driver. Our family has had no income for almost a month… My two children have not been able to go to school regularly because we had no income and couldn’t pay their school and notebook fees.”

Paramasivam, 43, an auto-rickshaw driver, said: “I hate every politician. Politicians are not for the people. [Prime Minister] Modi and [Tamil Nadu Chief Minister] Edappadi ordered the police shooting, killing 13 innocent people for one wealthy Sterlite owner.

“The Tamil Nadu government recently crushed a protest by peasants against a land grab for a highway project between Chennai and Salem. The money offered to them was quite meagre and so they protested to defend their land. But the government crushed their rights. You said the working masses should unite against the government to defend their rights. I agree with that.”

Paramasivam added: “I live near the Sterlite plant. The water is polluted and the air is also contaminated. Edappadi said the Sterlite plant would be permanently closed but Sterlite management has declared that the company would quickly reopen. Most Tuticorin residents have been affected by this plant. My close friend’s daughter recently died of cancer.”

Princeston, 22, who worked at VV Titanium, was seriously injured in the police attack and his leg was amputated. “I didn’t even participate in the protest and went to work that day but the police opened fire. The media has covered up the real conditions and what happened. Now no one will give me a job because I lost one leg. Who wants to live with a person with one leg? My life is gone. I didn’t like the way the government provided compensation—they gave very little—and I think it is a violation of human rights.

“Edappadi claims that the police shooting was carried out in the interests of people. Really? What did those 13 killed and the maimed people do to them? What will happen to the youth in this hospital ward who had serious injuries?… This is what the government does to the people. I hate every politician. The people fought because they were affected by the Sterlite plant, but the government shot at them, thinking that they would not come out like this again. This is called a democratic country!”

Thanga, 17, whose hand was broken during a police baton charge said: “If Sterlite reopens I’ll fight back. Even though my hand is broken, never mind. I oppose Rajini’s [popular Tamil actor, turned politician, Rajinikanth] comments that protesting people were ‘anti-social elements.’ He’s a rich man, so he defended the police actions. I agree with you that the police defend the interest of rich people.

“I won’t vote for any party because they are all corrupted. The DMK and AIADMK supported the building of Sterlite plant from an early stage and there were bribes. The current agitation against the smelter by various parties is bogus.”

Potcheliyan, 52, an Electricity Board contract worker, said he had lost faith in the official political parties. “All the parties and various reporters visited here and took reports but none of them returned and provided information about what they discovered. You [the WSWS] are providing us with printed papers and I’m very pleased about that.

“None of the official parties fights for working people. The CPI and CPM call themselves communists but there is no difference between them and the AIADMK and DMK.

“The CPM and CPI never fought to abolish the contract work system. I’ve been on contract for nearly 30 years… Once upon a time, they carried out limited land reforms, but in West Bengal they forcefully seized land from farmers so foreign companies could use it.”

WSWS reporters visited the home of Janshi Rani, who was killed in the police assault on May 22, and met her 55-year-old sister Sagayarani.

“My sister was not actively involved in the protests but was just an observer,” **Sagayarani** tearfully explained. “The police shot my sister and then held her dead body in custody for 16 days. Our family was unable to identify her mutilated body for several days because it was severely damaged. We had to pursue a legal case in order to get her body.

“I have not seen an incident like this in my life. The police brutally attacked everybody and also damaged CCTV and three-wheelers. Who gave this right to the police? The government said that police are for the people, but the police are for the rich.”

The authors also recommend:

The Tuticorin massacre and Modi’s India

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