“Water has been made a commodity for profit”—Chennai residents speak out on city’s water crisis

A WSWS Reporting Team
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World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with workers and other impoverished residents of the Viyasarpadi and Velachery districts of Chennai about the severe water crisis afflicting India’s fourth largest metropolitan area.

Voicing anger and outrage, the residents blamed bourgeois politicians from all the major parties at both central and state levels for the water crisis.

The WSWS correspondents explained that the capitalist system’s inability to provide such a vital necessity as water demonstrates that it has failed, and the need for a workers’ government so socio-economic life could be reorganized to meet social needs, not enrich a capitalist oligarchy. They also explained that the fight of Indian workers for their own rule must be a part of a broader struggle for international socialism.

Hasina, 31, a housewife living in a Viyasarpadi slum tenement, told the WSWS about the cynical official response to popular anger over the water shortage. She said: “I went along with many people in this area to question the local authorities. An official spoke with indifference to our plight. He said as there is a severe shortage for water everywhere, water distribution would continue as it is now, every other day. When we complained about the mixing of drainage water with running water, he said he was not aware of that and arrogantly told us that if we want more water we could get it by paying more for water supplied by private tankers.

“Water tankers,” explained Hasina, “sell water from 3 to 4 rupees per pot. This is very expensive for us, we simply cannot afford this much money. Because of that, most of the people don’t buy it, as they cannot afford it, even for daily meals.

“Here people in general are good to each other and are friendly,” she continued. “Nevertheless, when it comes to fetching water standing in queues, arguments come up, and sometimes harsh words are exchanged.

“All the political parties and their governments serve the rich and are indifferent to the plight of the poor people,” she added. “As you said the Sterlite company owes 10 crores [100 million] rupees to the state electricity board, but the government doesn’t take any action. But if we didn’t pay the electricity bill, they would take out the fuse and cut off the current.”

Reflecting a feeling of insecurity under conditions in which Muslim minorities are being terrorized by Hindu chauvinistic thugs protected by the ruling Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Hasina said, “When hearing the name of Modi, I feel terrified. Modi spoke of Hindutva and is responsible for killing two thousand innocent Muslims in Gujarat [when he was the chief minister in that state]. He imposes a ban on my own wishes. Wearing or not wearing burqa is my wish. But he tries to ban it.”

She added, “There should be a change. I am happy about your program for a socialist alternative that no other parties talk about. I agree with your party’s fight for a socialist workers’ government.”

Uma Maheswari, 39, a housewife, said, “I find your views new. Usually media people collect reports and leave. But you are explaining to us the source of this water crisis and this has to be seen as a social crisis. Even after 72 years since independence, the successive governments have failed to resolve the very basic water crisis. Here we have seen governments of the AIADMK and DMK [rival regional bourgeois parties].

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But they have failed to do anything to overcome this problem."

Praveena, 28, a contract medical worker, said, "Your WSWS site seems to be different from others. You see the water problem as a mounting social problem. People want change, but there is no party that speaks for the people. Though I am working in a government institution, I am employed on a contract basis with a monthly salary of 8,000 rupees [US$114]. My husband works in a Hyundai showroom. Sometimes we quarrel over who is to take leave to fetch water. We don't get proper sleep due to this water problem.

"It is the first time we come to know about your world party. We welcome your program to establish a workers government based on socialist policies. I like the idea of creating social equality for all."

Our correspondents also spoke with slum dwellers in the Velachery area.

Saravanan, 42, a three-wheeler driver, who earns on average 500 rupees [US$7.20] per day, pointed to the failure of state officials to resolve the water crisis, remarking, "During the 2015 Chennai flood, the Chembarambakkan dam was opened resulting in floods. If water had been stored successfully, the current crisis would not have happened. Now water has been made a commodity for profit.

"These governments are for big business and corporates. For example the new law which gives permission for 24 hours functioning of shops is only for big corporate shops like Walmart and Amazon. Demonetization (by the Modi government in 2016) has destroyed lives of many, myself included. Our enemy is this corporate government. It must go away. As you said I welcome socialist ideas and a socialist government."

Saravanan was very critical of the two main Stalinist parliamentary parties—the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPM and the Communist Party of India (CPI). Having thought they were communists, he joined the CPM's trade union federation, the CITU. "But now they have become like gangsters. They demand bribes to intervene to solve any of the workers' problems."

Ramesh, 26, a bank employee, opposed the communal appeals made by virulent Tamil chauvinistic parties like the Naam Thamilar Katchi (NTK or We Tamil Party) as "solutions" to the water crisis. "Tamil nationalist organizations like the NTK and May 17 movement say that Karnataka and Kerala (two neighboring states) are enemies of the Tamil people," he said. "But no worker is an enemy to another. The NTK people once came to clean the lake in this area. But by merely cleaning the lake, the water crisis cannot be solved. The infrastructure needed for delivering free water for all is impossible within this capitalist system."

Devi, 63, a widow, said, "Now there is a huge water crisis. But in 2015 we suffered due to floods. My daughter was pregnant at that time. She swam through the water for food and got injured. I came to this area 25 years ago. At that time there was a lake and we got water from that. Now 70 percent of the lake is destroyed and many companies and flats are being built in the area. They suck up huge amounts of water."

She had no faith in the ruling AIADMK or opposition DMK. "These parties are not for us," she stated.

Nithya, 28, an accountant, explained, "The government says water is free but we need to pay 100 rupees per month to get water. The government aims to evict me from my home as it is planning to build a mall and boat house. It is difficult to travel to my work place from other areas. No government is for us. Your idea of socialism is good and inspiring."

Murugan, 25, from Rameshwaram, works for Uber on a temporary basis. He said, "In a day, if we do 25 deliveries for Uber we get 1,000 rupees [US$14.40]. During summer time due to dehydration we drink 4 to 5 bottles of water. And it costs 100 rupees daily. Water is made a commodity."

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