

WSWS speaks to family of worker killed in Sri Lankan factory explosion

Our reporters

23 November 2025

On November 2, an explosion at a rubber-processing factory in the Kiriporuwa Estate, Yatiyanthota, killed a worker, Rajinikantha, while he was operating a machine, and left two others injured. The factory is situated 75 kilometres east of Colombo.

Workers accuse the estate administration of assigning Rajinikantha an ageing machine with inadequate safety measures and allege that the estate administration is seeking to cover up the incident and resume business as usual. They demand a proper investigation into the worker's death and urgent action to ensure workplace safety.

On November 16, World Socialist Web Site (WSWS) reporters returned to the Kiriporuwa Estate and met with workers in their line rooms. A line room is the barrack-style dwelling that many plantation workers are forced to live in.

A WSWS article, "Two Sri Lankan workers die in industrial accidents in one week," had highlighted Rajinikantha's death and also that of another worker, Vijayakumar, three days later. He had been operating a tea grinding machine at the Maussakelle tea factory in the central hill district of Sri Lanka.

Rajinikantha's mother, Muthukumar Subalakshmi, spoke to WSWS reporters about her son, with tears running down her face. She said her son was "very hard-working" and "friendly with co-workers in the factory."

"We lost our son who was looking after us. The factory won't tell us what happened. The police have filed a lawsuit, but we don't know what will come out of it.

"Officials are preparing to reopen the factory without even an acceptable investigation. People are angry about the crime committed against my son. I want to know what happened to my son," she said.

Subalakshmi said the factory manager had only verbally promised compensation for Rajinikantha's death. The factory was closed for three days of closure following the

death and some repair work was carried out. However, it is due to resume on November 25.

Rajinikantha's 21-year-old younger sister said workers needed to know exactly why the machine failed so that measures can be taken to prevent such tragedies. "We no longer have our elder brother. The factory might replace him with another person. What protection will he have?" she said. "This tragedy happened because the factory puts profits first over workers' safety, isn't it?"

Rajinikantha's uncle, K. Vijaya Kumar, explained that other fatal accidents have happened. A tree in the garden fell on a room and one person was killed. Estate officials gave the family a house elsewhere and washed their hands of the matter.

"After my nephew's death they say safety measures have now been taken, but who knows. They want to bring workers back to the factory." He said the death was an industrial crime and the estate administration must be held accountable.

S. Mylwahanam, a retired worker, estimated that the machines at the factory are about 30 years old. "Workers have no choice but to work despite the risks, to earn a living on the plantation. The administration is trying to make one worker do the work of two."

Padmavati, a retired female worker, said estate managers did not allow her to repair her home even though it has a leaking roof. They also do not permit her to build a toilet. A big tamarind tree near her house poses the danger of falling, but officials refuse to allow it to be cut down.

Renovation is only allowed for eligible residents. It is a way of forcing out those who worked in estates until retirement. Padmavati said that workers who have retired should have the right to a decent house.

She continued: "As houses have only one room, there's no way to give a separate space to an older girl. Adult girls and boys have to sleep in the same room. The estates

make millions of rupees in profits; we are confined to live like animals.

“On rainy days, the factory’s wastewater is dumped into the river; on dry days, it’s dumped along the roads, spreading a foul smell. We don’t know how much harm this causes to our health.”

Another female worker said that trade unions were failing to protect workers. She accused leaders of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), of which they are members, of not even coming to see about the death of a worker. “If workers raise problems, union leaders report to higher estate officials, leaving the workers to bear the consequences.”

An injured worker in the explosion, who lost three fingers, was her relative. “We face lack of safety not only in the factory but in every aspect of life. Children have to walk three kilometres to school. If parents accompany children, they would lose a day’s work.”

Angamuthu Jayakody, a female worker, explained that a year ago her husband was blinded in both eyes after being splashed with ammonia while working in the factory tanks. She said her family received no support from the company. Speaking about Rajinikantha’s death, she admitted the need for an organisation to protect workers.

A retired worker, who left the factory seven years ago, said that before this latest explosion, another worker had died after falling into a latex tank. The factory management dismissed it, without a proper investigation, saying it happened because the worker was drunk.

“We can tell if a machine is working properly by its sound and can stop it to fix any problems. These machines lack high-tech sensors to detect abnormal vibrations. A foreman may check a machine’s condition, but he is not properly trained—he has learned from experience.

“When I worked at the factory, there were about 65 employees; now the number has dropped to 20–25. Despite this, production has increased by pushing workers to the brink. Safety is so widely ignored that personal protective equipment—helmets, boots, gloves—is only provided when government officials come for inspections. After they leave, it’s taken back to the office.

“The chemicals used in the factory are extremely harmful. Inhaling ammonia can cause nosebleeds and difficulty breathing. The acid used is also very dangerous. This chemical could even cause vision loss—I’ve had to buy four pairs of spectacles. This shows how hazardous it is to work here.”

He explained that it takes about 15 minutes to bring a

machine up to speed. The heated internal parts are then cooled with running water before latex is fed into the machine. The latex and wastewater are separated in the centrifuge and collected in separate tanks. Acid is added to the wastewater, and any remaining rubber is recovered.

He said that previously wastewater was purified through biological treatment before being released into the environment. “Now, it is discharged directly. Ideally, workers involved in such processes should only be employed for a short period, like five years. But now, a person works here until they die.”

He learned about Vijayakumar’s death at the Maussakelle Tea Factory through social media and expressed support for the campaign being led by the Socialist Equality Party and the Plantation Workers Action Committee (PWAC). This includes a meeting scheduled in Maskeliya on November 30.

Workers said the meeting is crucial for building a genuine organisation to fight for workers’ rights, including to protect their health and lives. They said they would try to attend.

We invite all workers, youth and others to attend the public meeting on the death of plantation worker Vijayakumar at the Maussakelle Tea Factory on Sunday, November 30. It will also discuss the industrial death of Rajinikantha at Kiriporuwa Estate.

The meeting will also be streamed live on social media.

Date: Sunday, November 30

Time: From 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.

Venue: P.M.D Cultural Hall, Upcot Road, Maskeliya



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact