

Sri Lanka: Independent Workers Inquiry presents findings on Weliveriya water pollution

By our reporters
24 July 2014

The Independent Workers Inquiry Committee (IWIC) into water pollution at Weliveriya held a public meeting in Gampaha on Sunday to present its findings and conclusions.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka launched the IWIC last November amid widespread allegations that effluent from the Dipped Products' Venigros plant was contaminating local ground water and causing health problems. On August 1, the Rajapakse government mobilised the military to suppress a mass protest against the pollution. Two students and a young worker were killed and about 40 people injured in the violent attack.

The inquiry was mandated to investigate water pollution allegations against Venigros and the associated health problems; working conditions in the factory; who was responsible for the military killings; and a solution to the scourge of industrial pollution, which is endangering the health of workers and local residents.

In April, the IWIC decided to extend its investigation to water and air pollution by the Hanwella Rubber Products plant in Thunnana, Avissawella. The Dipped Products Company also owns the factory.

The venue for the IWIC's report-back meeting had to be changed several times after the police, at the instigation of the government and the company, intimidated local hall owners. The meeting was initially planned for June 29 at Vila Gaya Hall in Weliveriya but the police in an underhand manner ordered the hall owners to cancel the IWIC's booking. Other local hall owners were reluctant to rent their facilities for the event.

The meeting was rescheduled for July 20 at the Gampaha Town Hall—about eight kilometres from Weliveriya—and the appropriate payments made. The hall is owned by the local council, which is currently

controlled by the President Mahinda Rajapakse's ruling party. Two days before the meeting, the council informed IWIC organisers that the facility was not available. The false reason given was that the hall would be under repair on that day. The IWIC quickly arranged another hall in Gampaha.

The company, the government and the police were hostile to the IWIC investigation from the outset. The officer in charge of Weliveriya police asked an IWIC organiser why the SEP was discussing water pollution in the area when all other parties had abandoned the issue.

During the past seven months the IWIC has collected extensive evidence from Weliveriya and Thunnana residents and several workers from both of the Dipped Products owned plants. The committee gathered information about investigations conducted by various state institutions but which have been suppressed to protect the company. Detailed information on the military deployment against protesting local residents was also collected.

Sunday's meeting was chaired by SEP political committee member W.A. Sunil and the inquiry's findings presented by IWIC convenor Vilani Peiris, also from the SEP political committee. Six reports were presented on the issues investigated by the committee. The IWIC was widely supported by workers and youth with several local representatives from Weliveriya and Thunnana participating in the meeting.

SEP political committee member Panini Wijesiriwardane, who reported on water pollution, said: "There is clear evidence that toxic chemicals mixed with the water released by the factory is the cause of polluted water in the area but the company and various government institutions, including the Environment Authority, have consciously covered up this truth.

“Amid the rising protests by local residents, President Rajapakse ordered an investigation by the Industrial Technology Institute, which is capable of scientific research into the water pollution. But the organisation’s analysis was not made public because it had, in a limited way, indicted the company.” Wijesiriwardane presented detailed scientific data on the water pollution and the resultant health hazards.

SEP member Sanjaya Wilson reviewed the military attack on unarmed protesting local residents, including women and children. He said that eyewitness accounts and victims’ statements established that the vicious assault was a military exercise and similar to the sort of operations Sri Lankan soldiers conducted during the brutal civil war against the Tamils which ended in 2009.

“The nature of the attack and all the evidence gathered by the committee indicates that the military deployment, and the attack itself, were in line with orders from higher authorities within the government,” he said.

Meeting chairman W.A. Sunil presented evidence on working conditions in the Venigros factory.

The majority of production workers, he explained, were contract employees from labour hire companies “Their daily wage is only 350 rupees (\$US2.70) and their monthly income no more than 22,500 rupees,” he said.

“Labour laws state that employees should be made permanent after 180 days but Venigros has contract workers who have been with the company for five years or more. Workers toiled in oppressive conditions without proper safety instruments.”

Citing various examples, Sunil said that industrial pollution was a national and international catastrophe. “This is not an inevitable result of industrial development, as some environment-protection organisations claimed, but caused by predatory capitalist production and profit maximisation, without any concern for working people.”

SEP political committee member Rohantha de Silva told the meeting that, “pseudo-left parties like the Nava Sama Samaja Party, the United Socialist Party and the Frontline Socialist Party played a sinister role in derailing the peoples’ protest against water pollution.”

The NSSP and USP helped the right-wing United National Party exploit opposition of the people, the speaker continued, but “now all of them are silent ... Workers and youth must reject those parties. There can be no solution to industrial pollution within the capitalist system, as claimed by these organisations.”

Vilani Peiris summed up the evidence and presented the

inquiry’s conclusions: “The IWIC has established that Dipped Products, which owns the factories at Weliweriya and Thunnana, is responsible for the water and air pollution and the government is responsible for the military and police attacks in both places.

“The government claims that the closure of the Venigros factory at Weliweriya will solve the water pollution problem but this is false. The water has already been polluted in the area, which means that local residents will face health problems for years to come,” she said.

Peiris said relocation of Venigros factory to the nearby Biyagama Free Trade Zone meant that workers and people in that area would face the same problems. According to information provided to the IWIC by Venigros workers, only a few employees had been offered jobs at the new location and their wages and conditions have been slashed, she said.

“The unleashing of the military against protesting people by the government shows that it is dedicated to protecting big business and investors ... The root cause of these attacks is the deepening crisis of the profit system,” she said.

“This system cannot provide for the basic needs of the people. Instead, it is attempting to destroy all the rights won by the working class in last century. A social counter-revolution has been unleashed in every country against the working class. Industrial pollution and other disastrous conditions can only be ended through the establishment of a socialist system and production organised rationally to meet the needs of mankind, not the profits of the wealthy,” Peiris explained.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>