

Agitation against Construction of a Liquor Factory

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Party is conducting an agitation in Kallakottai, a panchayat in Gandarvakottai block of Pudukottai district in Tamil Nadu, where a liquor factory is coming up on a fertile land at the cost of livelihood of over 30,000 poor peasants and agricultural laborers in over 30 villages. AIALA has few thousand members in this area.

The construction work started for a factory all of a sudden on 20 acres of fertile land in the beginning of August. The local people did not know what kind of factory is being constructed in their village. They came to know it only when some workers from the neighbouring villages were denied work and those from Trichy were brought in at the site. Then an investigation was conducted by the party. The fact came to light that it is a liquor factory being constructed after acquiring fake documents of NOC of the panchayat administration, Environment Authorities clearance etc. Further investigation about the factory revealed that the factory will draw 6.21 lakh litres of water per day for its operations and only 200 employment opportunities will be generated. Construction work was started and bore wells were dug without due approval. The investigation also exposed that the local bigwigs and ruling party leaders are well aware of the project and only the people were kept in dark about the liquor factory.

As Party took up a campaign against the factory explaining the impending dangers to the resources, particularly ground water, those in support of the factory started campaigning that the factory would generate employment for thousands in the area.

To begin with, a memorandum was sent to all concerned govt departments and the CM, demanding stopping work in the factory immediately. Kallakottai Panchayat president's husband acts as the de-facto president. The Panchayat President and her husband, both were gheraoed and an explanation for clearing NOC and approval for construction work for the factory was sought from them. When the husband started explaining, people insisted that only the President would answer. The president simply said that she just did not know that a liquor factory was planned there. Party demanded, in that case, the President should pass a resolution in the panchayat that the permission given for the factory must be cancelled and send it to the collector. The president had to promise a panchayat meeting on this agenda in a week and to pass the resolution as demanded by the people led by the party. A campaign was taken up by the party in more than 10 panchayats in and around the factory. The campaign was well received by the people cutting across caste and party lines. They were basically poor peasants and agricultural laborers who would lose their livelihood to the liquor factory and this fact united them for the struggle.

As the campaign gathered momentum and people support for the campaign increased, the local administration called for a meeting on a short notice. Sensing foul play, people foiled this attempt and meeting could not be held as planned by the RDO. This compelled the RDO to invite the Party. The party in turn demanded to hold the meeting before the people. There was a mobilization from all the affected villages and the meeting was held before them.

Party took up a campaign before this meeting on the issue that the meeting would only discuss about

removing the factory and the time schedule for that. Hence, attempts of the administration to convince people about the 'benefits' of the factory failed miserably. Local DMK chairman was subdued by the united will of the people when he tried an upper hand. The MLA, who is from CPI, had to fall in line when he started talking in support of the project. Party put forth 3 demands - no to liquor factory and it must be removed immediately, district administration which did not take people in the area into account before giving any permission to the factory should apologize to the people, factory management, which has already caused damage to the area should pay Rs. 1 crore to the people as compensation - and issued an ultimatum of intensifying the movement. As a result, the construction and bore well digging work were stopped in the factory.

Party took up a campaign in 20 panchayats in and around Kallakottai and demanded that a resolution against the factory must be passed in the August 15 Gram Sabha meetings. Kallakottai Panchayat did the same. And demanded the factory should pack up and go. On August 26, a 'Conference Against Liquor Factory and For Security of Agrarian Workers and Poor Peasants' was held. This attracted new forces from among poor peasants, lower-middle peasants and agrarian laborers. Com. Balasundaram, Party State Secretary, addressed this gathering which was attended by more than 250 villagers. The Conference issued an open ultimatum for not allowing the factory to run even if it was constructed against the will of the people and any attempt to go against this decision will be resisted.

The RDO was then replaced and the new one tried damage the struggle by convening an informal meeting with the 'supporters' of the factory. But as people came to know about this and Party was informed, we invited media and mobilized hundreds of villagers and proceeded toward the venue and filled all the seats before those who were actually 'invited' for the meeting could arrive. As there was no formal invitation to anybody, the RDO was not able to say that the people can not attend the meeting. A local bigwig owing allegiance to Congress and a strong supporter of the factory, refused to sit along with the people. Finally there was no meeting and the new RDO's attempt also failed.

Pudukottai was the venue for the 8th State Party Conference held on October 9 and 10, and comrades were amidst preparations. The factory management and the administration wanted to avail this opportunity and to start work in the factory. On 6th of October, people found a priest proceeding toward the factory for performing pooja. They stopped him and sent him back. Leaders spoke to the Tahsildar and DSP, who denied any attempt on the part of the factory to begin work. More than 1000 villagers including more than 300 women gathered near the factory. Some supporters of the factory were allowed inside the factory by the police. When questioned about this, the police said it is only a pooja and people are attending that. When those opposing the factory tried to enter the factory premises, they were stopped by the police who used abusive language and started attacking the people, leaving many injured. The Tahsildar apologized to the people for the police action. A DMK leader and a bigwig, the Ambalam, came to the factory in 5 vehicles but they were chased away from the place. Work in the factory could not be started due to the relentless struggle of the people.

Now the police have registered false cases against 19 party activists including Com. Aasaithambi, District Secretary and SCM of the Party. A public meeting was planned on 18th October against the police's barbaric lathi-charge. But the permission was denied on the ground that Kallakottai is a 'troubled area'. Party has now planned to intensify the campaign in the area against any attempt to reopen the factory.

P.S.

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