Coronavirus crisis in Sri Lanka: A program for the working class

The Socialist Equality Party
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The Sri Lankan government of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse is using the enormous social, economic and political crisis produced by the COVID-19 pandemic to benefit the capitalist class. Rajapakse, with the backing of the so-called opposition parties, is exploiting the situation to further consolidate police-military rule, divert massive funds to crisis-ridden big business and inflict enormous suffering on workers and the poor.

Attending an all-party meeting called by Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse on Monday, the "opposition parties" represented in the previous parliament extended their full support to the government's ruthless measures.

Apart from Mahinda Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, the other parties that rushed to this meeting were the United National Party (UNP) and its breakaway faction; the Tamil National Alliance (TNA); the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP); the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna; and the plantation unions acting as political parties.

Last week, the country's business chambers praised the government's measures and demanded more funds and concessions.

Sri Lanka's coronavirus-affected number of patients has jumped over 100 since Tuesday. Those under observation as suspected cases number nearly 300. About 12,000 people are under quarantine at specified centres or in their homes.

Though no deaths have been reported so far, the Government Medical Officers Association, a pliant union of the government, has admitted that there may have been 550 cases of infection, and the pandemic could jump to a serious community-infection stage. These numbers are significant given the country's population is just 26 million.

Like its counterparts around the world, the Rajapakse government is taking ad-hoc measures, after wasting time and taking no precautions to prevent the spread of the virus for nearly two months. The country has been under indefinite lockdown since last week, with only brief curfew relaxations in several districts.

A major health crisis is brewing in Sri Lanka and the rest of the sub-continent, with the World Health Organisation (WHO) warning that neighbouring India, where 1.3 billion people live, could become next "epicentre" of the virus. By yesterday, India's COVID-19 deaths had been reported as 13, with 650 people infected.

Last Tuesday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government placed India under total lockdown for three weeks. India's decayed health sector has been allocated $2 billion, which is utterly inadequate. Amid deep poverty, many millions of rural and urban workers and the poor have begun to suffer enormous hardships.

In Pakistan, reports indicate eight deaths and more than 1,000 infected. Experts say that the low numbers of confirmed cases in India and Pakistan are the result of inadequate testing.

On Thursday, Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan said total lockdown could be "detrimental to the economy" and decisions should not be taken "out of panic." This is the voice of ruling classes in every country, including in the US. The overriding aim of governments is to protect the extraction of profit before the lives of people.

The attitude of the Rajapakse government is no different.

Amid the lockdown, tens of thousands of workers in 14 Free Trade Zones, mostly casual employees, were stranded for days in congested rooms, without pay and meals. Yesterday they were sent home empty-handed. Many plantation workers have been forced to work without protection and tens of thousands of estate and rural youth who migrated to the cities have lost their jobs.

More than 60 percent of Sri Lankan workers are employed as daily wage earners. Millions of rural farmers are among the hardest hit. Several million more workers are self-employed, earning their living daily in jobs such as vendors and three-wheel taxi operators.

Social inequality plagues the country. The poorest 20 percent of people receive only 5 percent of national income, while the richest 20 percent grab 51 percent.

Several public hospitals have been reserved for the treatment of the pandemic, but the country has only 500 beds in intensive care units (ICUs). Hospitals are hurriedly building additions. Nothing has been heard about mass testing.

The people are facing this health emergency as a result of decades of spending cuts. There was a 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) allocation for health care until 1977. As the globalisation of production opened the country to the exploitation of international capital, even this meagre allocation was slashed by nearly half. Funds for health, education and other social services were cut to finance the 30-year anti-Tami communal war that ended in 2009.

Profit-making private hospitals, labs and pharmaceutical companies have mushroomed. Colombo's crowing about Sri Lanka's high standard health index compared to other countries in South Asia has been shredded by the pandemic crisis.

While the government is stressing lockdown and social distancing, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus stressed recently that no single step is adequate. "Not testing alone," he said. "Not contact tracing alone. Not quarantine alone. Not social distancing alone. Do it all."

The government has allowed PCR [Polymerase Chain Reaction] testing by private hospitals at the request of the business chambers. They charge 6,000 rupees ($US31) or more than half the monthly wage of an ordinary worker.

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Rajapakse's capitalist priorities are revealed in his so-called relief measures. He has reduced interest rates and slashed the statutory reserve ratio, pledging cheap credit for business, industries and stock market financiers.

Sri Lanka's Central Bank assured the financial market of the provision of liquidity as necessary to counter any impact arising from the "evolving situation." Business chambers last week demanded more concessions, such as reductions of taxes, removal of restrictions on employing workers on overtime, and a moratorium for three months on contributing to workers' pensions.

The government and the opposition are concerned about social opposition. Symptoms of such unrest are already visible. People living in Colombo slums spoke to the WSWS about their dissatisfaction over the government's so-called relief package. About 700 inmates protested at Anuradhapura prison before being suppressed by the police, who killed two prisoners.

The pandemic crisis comes on top of the already developing social discontent expressed in continuous protests and workers' strikes since 2018, as part of the international upsurge of class struggles.

President Rajapakse, who came to power promising "strong government," began militarising the administration by appointing senior officers to key government posts. He is using the present crisis to accelerate this militarisation and consolidate a presidential dictatorship.

Army Commander Shavendra Silva has been appointed head of the National Operation Centre on Coronavirus. Using the dissolution of parliament, President Rajapakse has usurped all executive powers. He appointed Basil Rajapakse, his brother, to head a Presidential Task Force on COVID-19, which is meant to coordinate essential work. A minister under Mahinda Rajapakse's presidency, Basil Rajapakse was notorious for his autocratic methods.

What is being prepared is a presidential dictatorship controlled by a cabal around Rajapakse, packed with generals. Rajapakse is on record as declaring at a task force meeting: "I'm the one who runs this country. Those holding responsible posts should do as I say."

As foreign investment is being withdrawn from bonds, the country's dollar reserves are dwindling and the rupee is on the verge of a major crash. Sri Lanka has to pay $5 billion each year to service its external debt until 2024. Rajapakse yesterday appealed to major countries and multilateral agencies, such as the IMF and World Bank, for a loan moratorium.

Confronting this intensified crisis, Rajapakse will turn against the working class, unleashing military-police methods. The working class must prepare with its own program to mobilise its political strength, breaking from every faction of the ruling class and leading the rural poor against the onslaught.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) raises these demands:

• Massive funds to improve the health sector and build well-equipped hospitals. Free testing and medical services for all.

• All necessary protective equipment and facilities must be provided to health workers to carry out their duties.

• No loss of jobs for workers in any sector. All industries must be closed down to halt the pandemic, except those essential for health and food processing. Those workers under lockdown must be given fully paid leave.

• All those in the informal sector, the self-employed and poor farmers and fishers must be provided with full and unconditional financial assistance. They must be provided with free rations.

• The debts of farmers must be annulled, and free fertiliser, pesticides, seeds and other essentials provided.

• Slum people and the poor are living in unhygienic and congested conditions. They must be provided with decent living quarters in the massive, already-built apartment blocks and private and public buildings.

The government and the capitalist class will say there is "no money" to provide improved health, decent living conditions and housing. This is the mantra of the ruling class in every country as they amass vast profits and personal wealth. The fortunes of the capitalist class must be used to provide the required vital services. Foreign debts must be repudiated totally.

The capitalist class will oppose these necessary steps and violently turn against workers and the poor. Workers must unite across ethnic lines and form their own action committees at workplaces and neighbourhoods and seize the initiative. This will pave the way to rally the support of youth and the rural poor.

This means fighting for a workers' and peasants' government and the expropriation of the banks, large estates, and big businesses under workers' democratic control.

The bottom line is that the ruling classes in South Asia, whose countries were established in 1947–1948 through a conspiracy with British imperialism, are unable to address any of the democratic or social needs of the working masses. The working class must take the leadership of the multi-million rural poor and fight for a Union of Socialist Republics of South Asia.

This is a struggle for international socialism. As the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) has explained: "The response to the coronavirus cannot be coordinated on a nation by nation level… The solution must be global."

The SEP in Sri Lanka, as part of the ICFI, insists: "The present crisis demonstrates again that capitalism is an outmoded economic system and barrier to human progress. The danger posed by this pandemic and the catastrophic implications of global warning prove that the capitalist system must give way to world socialism."

Join the SEP to fight for this program.

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