

Sri Lanka: Oppose return to work in unsafe pandemic conditions! No to job destruction!

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)

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Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapakse's government and big business are demanding the resumption of major business activities, including export industries and construction work, ending the current COVID-19 lockdown.

This means sending hundreds of thousands of workers back into unsafe factories and workplaces as the deadly coronavirus surges around the world. The government has already allowed the largest plantation companies to restart production.

The pandemic's global death toll is now over 155,000, with more than two million people infected. There is no sign of the disaster being brought under control. Sri Lanka's official death toll is seven and the number of infections almost 240, but these low figures are mainly the result of grossly insufficient testing. So far, hospitals have conducted only 5,000 tests.

Colombo is using these low numbers to claim that situation is easing enough to implement an "exit strategy" to "reopen the economy." It has decided that schools and universities will begin opening in early May. This decision has met with resistance from teachers.

On Wednesday, Rajapakse told a high-level meeting of top bureaucrats, including the army commander, that the public and private sectors needed to "recommence their business activities." He declared that ministry secretaries had to emphasise "the responsibility of ensuring the public adhered to safety regulations." This is to blame the "public," that is, working people and the poor, for the spread of the coronavirus.

A few days before Rajapakse's meeting, Export Development Board chairman Prabash Subasinghe urged exporters to resume activities immediately, despite the national curfew. "It is important that the export industry understands that it is a national priority for us to export and bring in foreign revenue" and "rescue Sri Lanka from this COVID-19 crisis," Subasinghe said.

The Joint Apparel Association Forum—a garment industry lobby group—warned that its international competitors would marginalise Sri Lankan producers in the shrinking world market. "[U]nless factories are re-opened, a very serious trade shift that may take place in favour of our competitor countries... Competitors like Vietnam and Cambodia are open. Vietnam is actively tracing contacts," it declared.

This is a desperate call to revive profits, already battered by

the pandemic crisis. The government, teetering on the brink of defaulting on foreign loans, is equally desperate to shore up foreign reserves.

Rajapakse is echoing ruling class voices internationally. Donald Trump made a criminal call, on behalf of the US financial elite and big corporations, for moves to "open the economy with a big bang." European governments have issued similar statements.

As our sister party, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in the US, explained: "The aim of the Trump administration and the American ruling class as a whole is to 'normalize' the pandemic, that is, to acclimatize the population to the fact that large numbers of people will die for some time to come. Workers are supposed to accept it as something inevitable, with the death toll attracting less and less attention in the news.

"There is a deeply sinister class logic at work in this demand. Workers are to be treated as expendable. If they die, this is just a cost of doing business, with those who succumb to the disease replaced by others."

The World Health Organisation and medical experts have cautioned against such highly irresponsible calls to return to work. WHO director-general Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said on Monday that the virus is "10 times deadlier than the 2009 flu pandemic." He added: "Infection accelerates very fast and it decelerates much more slowly... That means control measures must be lifted slowly, and with control. It cannot happen all at once."

The criminal actions of the Rajapakse government and big business will accelerate the spread of the deadly virus and lead to a further loss of workers' lives. No medical experts have supported the government's move.

This government has no concern for the wellbeing of ordinary people. It did not take the warnings of a global pandemic seriously. When the first coronavirus-affected Chinese tourist was detected in Sri Lanka during January the government boasted about her recovery.

Even weeks later, Rajapakse rejected calls for a total lockdown, claiming: "Other countries may have the best medical facilities but we managed to cure infected people with our efforts."

A few days later, a total lockdown was declared without a

proper plan to distribute food, medicines and other essentials. This pushed tens of thousands of workers into the countryside, many without even their monthly wage. Thousands more were stranded in free trade zones for weeks. When mass protests were on the verge of erupting, the government sent the remainder back to their home towns.

What will happen to the workers when they return to work?

In garment sector alone, more than 400,000 workers are employed at low wages. Companies are preparing to wipe out jobs and cut wages.

During the 2008–09 global financial crisis, under the previous regime of President Mahinda Rajapakse, more than 500 garment and other factories were closed, with the sacking of hundreds of thousands of workers. The present crisis is far worse.

Apparel companies have applied to suspend their contributions to workers' pension funds—the EPF and ETF—for six months and impose a three-month "temporary" lay off of employees. They cited Vietnam's suspension of social security contributions for all workers.

Brandix, an apparel company that employs 47,000 workers, has cut wages and welfare funds by 5 to 30 percent and sacked temporary workers.

Softlogic and John Keels, two other blue-chip companies engaged in a range of industries, have announced similar wage and benefit cuts.

Workers will face unsafe workplace conditions. There is no mandatory requirement for employers to provide the necessary safety gear to workers. Keeping safe distances will be impossible in crowded transport services and factories.

The country's dilapidated health service is already having difficulties handling the pandemic. A new wave of infections could create a catastrophic situation. Despite the danger, Rajapakse regime has announced no additional public health funding which currently stands at just 1.2 percent of the gross domestic product annually.

By contrast, billions of rupees have been pumped into big business by the Central Bank on the president's orders, and bank rates have been lowered.

Sri Lankan garment companies supply giant retailers in the US and Europe that have cancelled many orders already. Likewise, Unilever dominates the world market for tea, Sri Lanka's main export commodity.

In Bangladesh, which also depends on garment export earnings, big business and the government called back the industry's 4.5 million workers last week. But tens of thousands were immediately thrown out of work and hundreds of thousands more will lose their jobs. Workers' protests have continued since last week against these sackings.

The Colombo government, like other regimes, will impose the burden of the deepest global crisis since the 1930s Great Depression on the backs of workers and the poor. While South Asia as a whole will experience low economic growth of 1.8 to

2.8 percent this year, according to the World Bank, Sri Lanka faces a 3 percent contraction.

In preparation to suppress workers' resistance, Rajapakse has intensified the militarisation of his administration.

The trade unions are gearing up to enforce the government's measures. The Free Trade Zones and General Services Union and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-controlled Inter-company Employees Union have formed a tripartite alliance with the companies and the government.

JVP union leader Lal Kantha has asked the government to convene a National Labor Council—an alliance of companies, unions and the state—to "strike a balance," which means impose jobs and wage cuts.

All the capitalist parties have supported the government's move to "reopen the economy."

Workers must unite with the working class across South Asia and internationally to defeat these attacks.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls on workers to oppose any return to factories or workplaces without safety precautions as guaranteed with independent scientific appraisal.

No to job, wage and pension cuts! Workers must receive full wages and allowances and compensation for job losses.

Billions of rupees must be utilised, not to save rapacious big business but to rapidly develop the public health service by building fully-equipped hospitals, launching a massive testing program, and providing the equipment needed for health workers and patients to eradicate COVID-19.

Workers must organise their own factory and workplace action committees, independent of the trade unions, to fight for these demands.

These urgent tasks can be achieved only by seizing the means of production from the capitalist class and re-organising them rationally for the interests of the majority of the society.

To implement these measures requires the fight for a workers' and peasants' government as part of the struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally.

We urge workers to initiate the discussions with the Socialist Equality Party about how to fight for this socialist program without delay.



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