

SEP (Sri Lanka) calls for action committees to counter COVID-19 and defend jobs

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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By “reopening the economy” to a larger extent and lifting daytime curfew of all districts from May 26, the Sri Lankan government is further exposing workers to the danger of the coronavirus pandemic raging globally.

Even with the insignificant number of daily tests in the country, COVID-19 cases have increased in one week from 1,319 on May 26 to 1,643 yesterday. Officially, the death toll is 11.

These understated official numbers are being used to claim the government’s “effectiveness” in “controlling” the pandemic. According to independent assessments, however, the spread could be two to three times higher and that community infections have begun.

Despite the nationalist demagoguery of the President Gotabaya Rajapakse and his government, the coronavirus knows no national boundaries. Globally, the pandemic is surging. Infections yesterday rose to six million and the death toll is inching towards 400,000. In neighbouring India, nearly 200,000 cases have been recorded and more than 5,000 deaths, making it the seventh most affected country internationally.

World Health Organisation emergencies head Dr. Mike Ryan said on May 25 that COVID-19 cases were still increasing in Central and South America, South Asia and Africa. He warned that “infection rates could rise again more quickly if measures to halt the first wave were lifted too soon.”

As governments are exposing workers to the coronavirus, opposition grows internationally against unsafe working conditions, loss of jobs, repression and hunger. In India, migrant workers are demonstrating against government repression. In Bangladesh, thousands of apparel workers have been protesting for six weeks against job losses. In Brazil, health workers struck across the country while Chile was engulfed with protests. In major capitalist centres, including in the US and Europe, workers are resisting reckless exposure to the coronavirus.

Workers in Sri Lanka, including from the garment industry, public health and Samurdhi welfare program, have taken action to defend themselves over the past several weeks.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warns workers not to be misled by the government’s propaganda that paints a false picture of the pandemic under control in order to get them to toil with the risk of infection and boost the profits of big business.

Response of President Rajapakse

From the outset, the response of Rajapakse to COVID-19 has been unscientific. The first infected Chinese tourist was discovered and recovered in January but he refused to implement a lockdown or effective testing to counter the pandemic. Instead, he declared: “Other countries may have the best medical facilities, but we managed to cure infected

people through our efforts.”

Rajapakse has exploited the pandemic as a pretext to intensify the militarisation of his administration. He appointed the Army Commander as the head of COVID-19 prevention task force and recently inducted Major General Sanjeeva Munasinghe as health ministry secretary.

Rajapakse dissolved the parliament in early March and called the general election for April 25 but the Election Commission had to postpone it amid the emerging global pandemic. He is still pushing for an early election, hoping to get a two-thirds parliamentary majority for his Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna in order to scrap constitutional barriers to autocratic executive rule in preparation for class war.

In reopening the economy, Rajapakse is echoing the call by US President Donald Trump and European governments for a back-to-work in the interests of the parasitic financial oligarchy and giant corporations. The weak capitalist class in Sri Lanka is on the brink of foreign debt default and desperate to revive economic activities.

Workplace conditions

To compel workers to return to work, the government has declared it has created safe workplaces. Director General of Health Service has issued “guidelines” to be observed, including the disinfection of institutions, sanitising facilities for employees and social distancing.

However, most workplaces are so congested that social distancing is impossible. The government has refused to conduct mass testing. Workers are not subject to PCR (polymerase chain reaction) tests to identify asymptomatic cases. Some workers have been provided with masks but inadequate sanitary facilities. Moreover, workers have to use crowded buses and trains to travel to work. Thus, there is a great risk that workers will become infected unknowingly.

In Sri Lanka, only about 10 percent of health workers have been provided personal protective equipment (PPE) and many have not been PCR tested. Most hospitals lack safe facilities for staff. At the same time, the burden of the pandemic is being imposed on the working class. Some businesses have closed entirely. Other workplaces have reopened but only one-third of workers have been recalled. Hard won rights are being wiped out particularly in the private sector with cuts to wages, allowances and pensions and increased working hours. In many cases, casual and contract workers have been terminated.

Only about one-third of public sector workers have been recalled. There is a possibility that others will lose their jobs as the government has declared that it can manage with a smaller workforce.

The livelihoods of the self-employed, which make up more than 50 percent of the workforce, are in danger. Many small and medium-level businesses have collapsed or are in severe crisis.

The government has failed miserably to provide the basic necessities for people who have lost their livelihoods during the lock down. Amidst growing anger, the government started paying a paltry monthly allowance of 5,000 rupees (\$US27 or less than a dollar a day) to some but is terminating the payment in June.

The government's callous attitude towards entire working class was shown when it halted the repatriation of thousands of migrants from the Middle East as COVID-19 spread there. Most are stranded with lapsed visas. More than one million Sri Lankan workers are among many millions of South Asian workers toiling in the Middle East. The regimes in Qatar, Kuwait and Dubai are forcing migrant workers to leave.

Big business is only concerned about profit. The cash-strapped government initially pumped about 300 billion rupees through the banks as financial aid. The corporate elite is demanding more cheap credit to the tune of 10 percent of GDP and the scrapping "old labor laws" to provide for unfettered exploitation.

Build workplace action committees

In defending their rights from these brutal attacks, workers cannot rely on the trade unions which have become appendages of big business. Many sections of workers have come into struggle but they face the roadblock of the unions.

The unions have participated in tripartite discussions with employers and the labour minister and agreed to wage cuts for workers not recalled, paving way for them to be laid off.

As part of this deal, unions sabotaged the opposition of workers at the Esquel multinational garment group, paving way for the company to force workers to accept "compulsory retirement." The unions involved were the Free Trade Zone and General Service Employees Union and the Ceylon Mercantile, Industrial and General Workers Union. This is happening at many companies.

Five unions, including the above two, sent a complaint to the labour minister last week that 35 companies have cut wages, jobs and other rights. This futile appeal, however, is simply to stave off any struggle by workers.

The SEP calls on workers to organise their own independent action committees to fight for safe workplace conditions and to defend jobs, wages and other rights.

These committees must be comprised of trusted representatives, elected democratically by workers, to carry out the following tasks:

- Ensure safety conditions in the workplace and maximum protection from COVID-19 by engaging with reliable scientists and health professionals.

- Supervise the safety measures, including regular testing, social distancing, the proper usage of PPE and the deep cleaning of institutions. The cost of all safety measures must be borne by the corporations and the government.

- Make sure that if a worker tests positive, he or she should be quarantined and receive proper treatment without the loss of pay.

- Organise the fight to defend all jobs, wages, allowances and pension rights. Any worker who is terminated must be paid full compensation, not according to the management calculations.

The committees will have to use the methods of class struggle, including strikes, to fight for these basic rights. In doing so, they will have to reach

out to workers throughout the island and internationally, and involving social media to coordinate struggles, because the fight for safe working conditions and workers' rights is global in scope.

The SEP and the *World Socialist Web Site* is taking the initiative with the launching in coming weeks of four online newsletters, in Sinhala and Tamil, for workers in the health, apparel and education sectors, as well as for immigrant workers.

Fight for a socialist program

The SEP insists that the working class cannot defend its rights within the capitalist system which is based on maximising profit for a few at the expense of working people. The Rajapakse government is determined to defend the profit system and is preparing a dictatorship based on the military to impose the burden of the crisis on the backs of workers and the poor.

Fearing the explosive development of the class struggle, every establishment political party, including the right-wing United National Party, its breakaway the Samagi Jana Balavegaya, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the various Tamil and Muslim parties, are backing the government.

Workers must break from every faction of the ruling class and fight for a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies.

The major companies, estates and banks must be placed under the democratic control of the working class for the rational and scientific reorganisation of production for the benefit of the majority of society.

Workers in Sri Lanka can only wage this fight by uniting with their class brothers and sisters internationally. Against the government's anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim provocations, the working class must unite across ethnic and religious lines and rally the rural poor.

The Socialist Equality Party fights for the establishment of a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam, as part of the struggle for socialism throughout South Asia and internationally.

Above all what is necessary is a revolutionary party that will educate, organise and mobilise workers in the struggle for this perspective. We urge workers and youth to join and build the SEP which alone fights for a socialist and internationalist program.



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