

Sri Lankan workers must rally the rural poor against Rajapakse's "herd immunity" policies

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) statement
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Coronavirus cases are rapidly increasing across Sri Lanka, shattering the false claims by President Gotabhaya Rajapakse that the island nation is unique and, unlike other countries, was able to "control" COVID-19.

Reported infections have rapidly increased over the past two weeks, rising to 5,920 and the number of active patients climbing from 131 to 2,406 by October 21. The official figures are still low, however, because the Rajapakse government has only ordered random tests in factories and other areas.

Although most of the new cases have been among factory workers, dozens of villages are in isolation, their residents prevented from moving because many infections are now being discovered. Gampaha, the second most populous district in the country and the location of 6,845 large and small factories, is under total lockdown.

The true situation is being hidden because the government refused to implement rigorous anti-COVID-19 measures when the pandemic erupted globally early this year and first impacted on the country in late January.

Information about the recent increase in infections emerged after hundreds of workers from a Brandix factory at Minuwangoda in Gampaha complained of being ill last month. Brandix is one Sri Lanka's premier apparel manufacturers with many plants on the island. One employee refused to work unless given medical treatment and was later discovered to have the coronavirus after being tested at a hospital.

Confronting with rising anger among workers, health authorities tested all Brandix employees at the Minuwangoda plant, discovering that at least 1,200 out of its 1,400-strong workforce, and hundreds of their associates, were infected.

Health authorities, amid rising tensions among free trade zone (FTZ) workers, conducted 15,000 random tests and by Monday had discovered another 224 cases. There are about one million workers employed in Board of Investment companies, including in the 16 FTZs in Sri Lanka.

These incidents expose the callous and criminal character of the government's refusal to implement adequate health and safety measures. Last week, Labour Minister Nimal Siripala de Silva, after a discussion with a representative of Katunayake Free Trade Zone companies, declared that the government's policy is to "maintain the country normally and that factories

will be maintained with health security methods."

Army Commander Shavendra Silva, chief of the National Operation Centre for Prevention of COVID-19 Outbreak (NOCPCO), echoed this, insisting that workers living in lockdown areas could go to work using their service identity cards as curfew passes.

The undeclared response of the government to COVID-19 is "herd immunity"—the false claim that if the virus is allowed to spread unchecked it will eventually exhaust itself by running out of people to infect. But as ACCESS Health International president and scientist William Haseltine recently warned, "Herd immunity is another word for mass murder."

So-called herd immunity, which is being pursued by US President Donald Trump, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and others, has produced a catastrophe. Globally, COVID-19 cases have passed 40 million and on Monday, the death toll climbed to over a million. This week, Professor, Manindra Agrawal, who is a member of the Indian government appointed committee on the pandemic, warned that half of India's 1.3 billion people will be infected by February.

The Rajapakse government waited until March 20 before imposing any lockdown measures and then, at the end of April in reaction to calls from big business, ordered a reopening of the economy.

From the outset, Colombo's response to COVID-19 has been of a militarist character, with Army Commander Silva appointed as head of the NOCPCO, thus undermining the role of medical experts.

One critic of government policy has already been silenced. Medical Research Institute (MRI) Director Dr. Jayaruwan Bandara told the media that the new spike in infections indicated that COVID-19 has been in the community for the past few months. He was immediately demoted and replaced.

Ignoring expert medical advice, the Rajapakse government—before, during and after the March-April lockdown—has refused to provide adequate healthcare funding and overhaul the public health sector that has been run down over decades.

Instead, Rajapakse ordered the country's Central Bank to provide 150 billion rupees (\$US814 million) to companies, via the commercial banks. These funds mainly benefitted big

business. Last week, the Central Bank boasted it disbursed about 178 billion rupees and is ready to release even more.

The Rajapakse government, without hesitation, is also taking out more foreign loans and paying massive foreign debt instalments—\$4.5 billion this year—to the international banks. Its budget allocation next year for the health sector is just 159 billion rupees. Defence and “internal security” allocations to strengthen the repressive state machinery against workers and the poor will exceed 500 billion rupees next year.

Colombo’s principal concern is to defend the profits of big business and fulfil its commitments to the international banks, but at what cost?

In April, President Rajapakse directed companies to recall only the minimum number of workers when reopening, sanctioning huge job and wage cuts and a lengthening of working hours.

During the lockdown, the government also blocked the return of migrant workers, a majority of whom are employed in the Middle East. While it later allowed a limited number to return, these workers have been barred again. Many of these workers are now starving in the streets and several dozen have died from COVID-19.

Working people in Sri Lanka now face the rising cost of essential items. Food inflation, for example, rose in September to 11.5 percent. Poor peasant farmers are not receiving the usual government subsidies and production costs are soaring.

On September 30, the World Bank reported that poverty in Sri Lanka had risen from 8.5 percent last year to 13.5 percent when measured against the income of \$3.50 per day, an impossibly low figure for an average worker or the rural poor in Sri Lanka.

The government’s preoccupation is not the wellbeing of workers and poor but the entrenchment of a dictatorial regime to suppress the inevitable political eruptions of workers and the rural masses against its reactionary policies. It is currently “debating” in parliament a 20th amendment to the constitution which gives the president sweeping powers.

All the Sri Lankan opposition parties, including the Jathika Samagi Balavegaya (JSB), Tamil National Alliance and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, have endorsed the government’s pandemic measures. The SJB cancelled its bogus protests against the 20th amendment, citing the virus.

While bourgeois parties have made cowardly appeals to the government, calling on it to postpone the debate on the constitutional changes, they have not opposed its autocratic methods of rule or the militarisation of the administration.

The fake-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) has advised the government to “seriously think about how it is running the economy” during the pandemic. Early this year the FSP wrote to the prime minister offering—“notwithstanding differences”—its support to fight COVID-19.

Backed by the pseudo-left, the trade unions have more openly aligned themselves with the government and big business,

supporting their “back to work” policies in the guise of maintaining the national economy.

Free Trade Zones and General Services Employees Union leader Anthony Marcus told the media: “The suitable solution [in the present crisis] is maintaining production activities by implementing health guidelines.” This is the language of the companies.

In opposition to the treacherous role of the unions and the fake left, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) advances the following policies to fight the Rajapakse government’s murderous agenda.

* The immediate allocation of funds to fully upgrade the health infrastructure, including the provision of high-quality protective equipment to all health workers.

* Production to continue only in essential health and food production industries and under strict health conditions. No job losses and fully paid leave to all other workers.

* All those in the informal sector—including all self-employed, poor farmers and fishermen—must be provided with sufficient and unconditional financial assistance.

Workers should build their own independent action committees to fight for the health and safety of all workers and to defend their rights. These action committees must reach out and rally the rural poor.

As the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and the *World Socialist Web Site* have explained, the fight against COVID-19 is primarily not a medical issue but a political struggle, and one based on the understanding that there is no nationalist solution to the pandemic.

These demands can be addressed only through an uncompromising struggle against global capitalism and on the basis of an international socialist program. Since the eruption of the pandemic crisis, the SEP has deepened the fight for this program, uniting workers across ethnic lines.

Central to this struggle is the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government which should place the banks, large estates and big businesses under workers’ democratic control and repudiate all foreign debts. This perspective is bound up with fight for a Union of Socialist Republics of South Asia.

We urge Sri Lankan workers and youth to join the SEP, which alone fights for this program. Attend our online public meeting this Wednesday, October 28, at 7 p.m.



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