Sri Lankan government lifts limited lockdown despite rising infections

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On Monday the Sri Lankan government lifted the limited lockdown imposed on the Western Province, despite a surge of COVID-19 cases and deaths. However, the government has continued a police curfew in 23 police divisions in the Western province and many other areas throughout the country.

As of Wednesday evening, according to the grossly understated official statistics, the number of COVID-19 cases in the country surpassed 15,000 and the death toll was 46. From January to September, the number of people infected was 3,500. However, from the beginning of October, the number has increased dramatically by more than 10,000, while the death toll has risen by 33, or more than tripled.

Justifying the decision to drop the limited lockdown, President Gotabhaya Rajapakse declared that the government had opted for "carrying our normal activities while controlling the disease." Speaking to the Task Force on COVID-19 Prevention, he added that the pandemic was a "health issue" and the responsibility for "protecting people against the virus and steering the country forward lies with the health sector and the government."

In effect, the government is telling people that they have to live with the surging virus and accept it as "new normal." Rajapakse is echoing the homicidal policy of the ruling classes internationally. Though the virus is a biological phenomenon, the medical crisis caused by the pandemic, which has exposed the failure of capitalism, is primarily a political issue.

Governments have run down the health system over the past four decades in the interests of profits of the financial elite and big corporations. By forcing workers back to work to defend the same profit interests, the ruling classes have allowed the virus to run rampant globally.

The number of cases globally has risen to more than 50 million and the death toll is nearing 1.3 million. Sri Lanka's immediate neighbour, India, yesterday reported the number of infected persons as 8.5 million and a death toll of over 127,000.

Rajapakse attacked the media and the public for forgetting the so-called "successful containment of the virus," blaming them for the current situation. He claimed that the government was spending 60 million rupees ($US33,000) daily on testing and declared that it was the responsibility of the people to "comprehend this situation."

In reality, the government's spending on testing is small compared to its assistance to big business, including a moratorium on loan repayments. Over the past six months the Central Bank has released 178 billion rupees to major companies.

The very limited number of cases and deaths recorded in Sri Lanka is related to the low rate of testing. Some COVID-19 infections have only been identified after the death of the individuals at home. Cases are now being reported from homes for the elderly, hospitals, prisons, plantations, remote villages, police barracks and their training colleges. Many work places have also reported infections.

Medical experts have criticised the shift by health authorities to Rapid Antigen Detecting Testing (RADT), saying it will not yield accurate results. Presiding over a cash-strapped government, Rajapakse has instructed health authorities to import RADT kits because of their low cost.

Rajapakse hypocritically praised health workers and the public health system for controlling the pandemic. However, anger among these front line workers is increasing over the lack of proper health facilities, non-payment for their difficult overtime work, lack of

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personal protective equipment (PPE) and testing.

On November 5 and 6 at Homagama hospital in the Colombo suburbs, hundreds of health workers protested demanding adequate PPE and tests.

On October 31, nurses and other staff held a protest action at the Matara general hospital in the island's south, demanding their stipulated break after six days of heavy work. One nurse said: "We also need a break. We need to look after the needs of our family at home. Employees are not ready to accept oppressive conditions in silence."

The government has ordered heads of public institutions to minimise staffing when recalling personnel back to work. According to a circular issued by the presidential secretary, P.B. Jayasundara, only 20 percent of staff will be called back to work at public institutions in "alert districts."

The government is seeking to exploit the health crisis to accelerate the economic reform agenda ordered by the International Monetary Fund, which has repeatedly demanded the downsizing of the state sector.

Already the labor ministry has closed its offices in Sri Lankan embassies abroad. Its Foreign Employment Bureau, which provides service for more than a million migrant workers, has announced a scheme whereby 50 percent of its staff will work from home at half of their monthly salary.

There are many signs of growing workers' opposition against the government and companies.

On October 29, the Brandix garment factory located at the Koggala Free Trade Zone was forced to close down when one worker was found to be infected by COVID-19 when she was taken to hospital with another sick colleague. The factory was closed for two weeks to allow 1,500 workers to quarantine.

However, two days later the management, with the support of the police, broke quarantine regulations and recalled workers to work. One worker told the WSWS that half of the employees did not return and unrest was developing against the callous actions of the company and the police.

Brandix is one of the largest garment companies in Sri Lanka, producing apparel for the US and EU corporations. It has many factories and employs around 50,000. In early October, more than 1,000 infected workers were found at its Minuwangoda factory when the state authorities were compelled to carry out testing.

In the last week of October, MAS Holdings-owned Bodyline garment factory at Horana, which employs about 6,000 workers, was compelled to close down when dozens of workers were found to be infected. The MAS is another giant company which employs 99,000 workers in 15 countries.

The trade unions are working hand-in-hand with the government to implement its measures and suppress the opposition of workers.

Last week hundreds of Katunayake Free Trade Zone (KFTZ) workers, who were in quarantine, were rounded up and brought back to their hostels by the military. This was decided by the Task Force at the National Operations Centre for Prevention of COVID-19 Outbreak supposedly so as to free quarantine centres for other patients.

As the workers' unrest was growing, as they had not been provided with foods and other necessities, the Free Trade Zones and General Services Employees Union immediately intervened to deflect the anger. The union's joint secretary Anton Marcus wrote a letter to the KFTZ coordinating officer appointed by the president to KFTZ, Rear Admiral Hewage, appealing for relief.

The appointment of military officers such as Hewage is part of Rajapakse's militarisation of his administration amid fears in ruling circles of social unrest among workers. The trade unions have demonstrated their willingness to collaborate with the government and the military which will be used to suppress the working class.

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