

Oppose Sri Lankan government's repressive essential services order against port workers fighting COVID-19

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
19 November 2020

Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse has responded to growing COVID-19 infections among Colombo port workers by issuing an “extraordinary gazette” on Tuesday night which makes the Ports Authority an essential public service.

At least 80 workers from the main port in Colombo tested positive for the coronavirus this week. Officials told the media that falling work attendances had reduced port operations by 60 to 70 percent.

About 15,000 workers are directly employed in Sri Lankan port facilities—over 10,000 in Colombo and others at the Trincomalee, Galle and Kankesanthurai harbours. Thousands more transport workers and other employees visit these ports every day. All these workers and their families are at risk from COVID-19 at these facilities and in other parts of the country.

Ignoring these dangers, the government is now ordering these employees to keep working, irrespective of the tragic human cost.

Under Rajapakse’s essential services act, any port employee not attending work faces “conviction after summary trial before a Magistrate,” and is “liable to rigorous imprisonment” of two to five years and/or a fine of between 2,000 and 5,000 rupees (\$US11–\$US25).

The movable and immovable property of anyone convicted can be seized by the state and his or her name “removed from any register maintained for profession or vocation.”

It is also an offence for an individual to “incite, induce or encourage any other person” not to attend work through a “physical act or by any speech or writing.” This means that workers and others fighting to defend the democratic rights of port employees can be punished.

The Rajapakse government’s attack on the democratic rights of port workers is a warning to the entire working class and a direct escalation of its criminal attempts to force employees to keep working, even as coronavirus infections spread across the island.

Essential service acts have previously been used to break strikes and protests, and to victimise and sack workers. When emergency laws are declared, essential service orders can be extended to the private sector.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls on the working class as a whole to defend all port workers and demand the immediate withdrawal of the essential service order.

In order to fight COVID-19, the SEP calls on workers to fight for the following measures:

- * A shutdown of all non-essential services with full wages compensation. Workers in essential services—as determined by workers, not the government, as necessary to maintain society—must be provided with all safety equipment and practices needed to prevent them becoming infected.

- * Any worker infected must be given immediate medical leave and the necessary treatment free of charges and be provided with adequate financial assistance.

- * A massive expansion of effective testing programs, the upgrading of health infrastructure and the provision of high-quality protective equipment to all health workers.

- * The education system must be organised for all students, including those in rural areas, to obtain the best education while residing safely at home.

These basic steps are required to defend the lives of all workers and the poor. No one should have any illusions that the Rajapakse government is protecting the population from COVID-19.

The global pandemic has already infected nearly 57 million people and taken the lives of more than 1.3 million. Workers have lost millions of jobs and millions have become poorer across the globe.

In Sri Lanka, the official number of infections is rising towards 20,000, with about 17,000 of these since early October. The death toll has increased from 11 to 73 in the same period. But according to unofficial estimates, there are 30,000 cases in Colombo alone with hundreds of cases reported at work places, prisons, health institutions, in the police force, and in remote villages.

The Sri Lankan government initially responded to COVID-19 with a delayed lockdown on March 20 but reopened the economy in late April, claiming it had controlled the highly infectious disease. When hundreds of cases began emerging in early October, it put some areas in lockdown but soon lifted

those measures.

Addressing the Task Force on COVID-19 Prevention early this month, Rajapakse declared that the government had opted for “carrying our normal activities while controlling the disease.”

In other words, the population must live with the pandemic and accept it as the “new normal.” The operations of state institutions, all private factories and commercial centres must proceed unhindered, ignoring the fact that thousands of workers have been infected.

According to Board of Investment figures released early this month, only 28,670 PCR (polymerase chain reaction) tests were conducted among 700,000 workers in the country’s Free Trade Zones and some outside factories. These limited tests, however, discovered that at least 1,500 people were coronavirus positive.

Like every other government, the Rajapakse regime is forcing people back to work in order to defend the profit interests of the corporate elite.

On Tuesday, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse, who is also finance minister, presented the government’s 2021 budget. It contained huge tax concessions for local and international investors, including some total exemptions, as well as 50 percent reductions in corporate and personal income taxes.

Declaring the ports an essential service makes clear that Colombo’s ruling elite is totally indifferent to workers’ health and safety and will do everything it can to defend the profit system.

As one worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “Employees requested they all be given PCR tests. Workers also asked [the authorities] for scientifically prepared special protective cloth to wear when working, but all they received were rubber gloves and 200 PCRs tests per day.” He also explained that testing was not being done regularly.

Another employee said the authorities were trying to derail the growing opposition among workers. The workforce at Colombo port’s Jaya container terminal has been divided into two and directed to work in two-week shift stints, he said. Some retired workers had also been recalled and others brought in from “man-power companies.”

The government is determined to suppress all working-class opposition. Soon after Rajapakse came to power, and in line with the militarization of the president’s rule, the Ports Authority, a key working-class centre, was put under the chairmanship of retired Army Commander Daya Ratnayake. Other retired and active generals have been appointed to head government institutions.

Port workers have repeatedly opposed the government’s moves towards further privatisation. Just four days before the August 5 general election, 10,000 workers downed tools in Colombo port, but their struggle was betrayed by the unions.

The unions are likewise fully supporting the government’s repressive measures at the ports and other workplaces.

Port authority trade unions affiliated to the ruling Sri Lanka

Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), the opposition Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) have not said a word about Rajapakse’s draconian essential service measures.

Another worker told the WSWS that even before the essential service order was imposed, union leaders were asking employees to understand the country’s situation and to “continue working.”

Free Trade Zones and General Services Employees Union joint secretary Anton Marcus has previously offered his support to Katunayake Free Trade Zone coordinating officer, Rear Admiral Hewage, who was appointed to that position by Rajapakse.

The opposition SJB and JVP told parliament on November 3 that they were ready to back the government and demanded an all-party conference to discuss their support. These bourgeois parties have no fundamental differences with the Rajapakse regime and its authoritarian methods; their concern is protecting big business profits, not the lives of the people.

Workers must come forward and defend their basic rights by rejecting the government’s murderous choice to put their well-being at risk.

The rising opposition among port workers and other sections of the working class is a welcome development. In order to defend their democratic rights and institute the necessary measures to protect their health and safety, they must form rank-and-file workplace action committees and safety committees independent of the trade unions. These committees must reach out to other workplaces. The SEP and the WSWS are ready to assist workers in this struggle.

We call on workers to rally the rural poor and combine their struggle with the fight for a political movement of the working class across Sri Lanka, and internationally, aimed at establishing workers’ and peasants’ governments to implement a socialist program. We urge workers, students and young people to join the SEP and build it to lead the fight for this perspective.



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