

No to forced work amid raging pandemic! All non-essential production must be shutdown with full compensation to workers!

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
24 December 2020

Big businesses in Sri Lanka are openly demanding employees keep working in the face of a rising number of COVID-19 infections. These life-threatening demands are fully backed by the government of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse.

Numerous cases have come to light in recent weeks of employees being forced to work by local firms and foreign companies registered with the Board of Investment (BOI). Over 1,600 companies, employing more than 700,000 workers in free trade zones (FTZs) and at other locations, are listed with the BOI.

In the latest incident, 100 workers tested positive for the coronavirus at Unichela garments in Panadura, about 30 kilometres south of Colombo. The company, which employs around 2,000 workers, only closed its factory on Tuesday following rising anger and demands for action by its workforce.

The Unichela factory is owned by MAS, a giant conglomerate which employs 100,000 workers in 15 countries, including several in Sri Lanka. In early November, hundreds of virus infections were discovered at MAS apparel factories at Horana and Agalawatte in the Western Province. While the facilities were closed in response workers' demands, management soon reopened the plants.

Last week, a BOI office worker from the Seethawaka Export Processing Zone, about 50 kilometres from Colombo, contacted the *World Socialist Web Site*, reporting that COVID-19 infected workers had been discovered at several companies in the zone since October. The companies, the worker said, had only sent those infected away for treatment and production had continued without proper health precautions. There are 22 factories, employing more than 25,000 workers, in the zone.

The Star Garment plant, which is owned by the US-based Komar company, and located in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone (KFTZ) was forced to close at the end of November when 70 of its 650 workers tested positive for COVID-19. Within three days management reopened the plant and demanded all employees return to work, including those in quarantine. Star Garment workers refused this directive, declaring that management was violating health regulations.

In a similar incident, Brandix, another large garment manufacturer in Sri Lanka, demanded that its employees ignore virus symptoms among fellow workers and keep working. PCR (polymerase chain reaction) tests later discovered that hundreds of workers at the plant were infected.

Factories, tea estates and government institutions are now hotbeds for COVID-19 throughout the island. This dangerous situation is a direct result of the Rajapakse government's calls in late April for a reopening of the economy.

In Sri Lanka, the number of COVID-19 cases now exceeds 38,600 and, as of yesterday, the death toll had risen to 184—a three-fold increase in cases since early October and a 14-fold increase in the number of deaths. However, these relatively low figures, thus far, are a product of the country's low testing numbers and give a false picture of the real situation.

National Operation Centre for Prevention of COVID-19 (NOCPCO) chief Army Commander Shavendra Silva is making daily statements about the need for isolation measures in many areas. These announcements, and rising case numbers in factories, point to the necessity for a national lockdown and the closure of all non-essential workplaces in order to bring the pandemic under control.

The Rajapakse regime from the outset has been hostile to a total lockdown. While schools were originally closed on March 5, it took until March 20—amid growing mass concern—before the government announced total lockdown. These measures to some extent helped contain the spread of the virus because working people adhered to the precautionary health advice.

Colombo, however, failed to implement an adequate program of social assistance for the needy, or overhaul the under-funded health system. Following demands from the major corporations, it reopened the economy, creating the conditions for the surge of the pandemic and encouraged companies to demand employees keep working.

On December 1, President Rajapakse told the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce that the island had to live with the virus as “a new normal” and that investors should reap its “beneficial consequences.”

Rajapakse, moreover, responded to growing concerns by Colombo Port workers about the danger of COVID-19 infection in their industry by imposing a draconian Essential Service order that bans any industrial action with the threat of heavy jail terms and fines. The trade unions fully backed the government's brutal response to port workers concerns.

Addressing education officials on December 10, Rajapakse declared that the coronavirus should not be allowed to “disrupt

education” services. This had nothing to do with concerns for children’s education—last month his government slashed 40 billion rupees (\$US211 million) from its national 2021 education budget.

The education ministry has announced that all schools, apart from those in the Western Province and some isolated areas, will reopen on January 11. This means that hundreds of thousands of students, teachers and parents will be exposed to the highly-infectious disease. Colombo wants kids back in school in order to force their parents to return to work.

Sri Lanka workers and youth must reject President Rajapakse’s criminal insistence that the pandemic is “under control.” Globally COVID-19 infections are escalating. Infections are now above 77.7 million and deaths at over 1.7 million. In the US, there are 18.4 million cases and more than 300,000 deaths while in India cases surpassed 10 million this week. Hundreds of thousands of new infections have forced EU countries into lockdown and the UK has reported a new even more infectious strain of the virus.

Despite this, governments in these countries are pursuing so-called “herd immunity” policies thus guaranteeing that even greater numbers will be infected and die. Their priority is that profits of the banks and the corporations must take precedence over human life. Rajapakse is following the same policies.

On December 8, the *Dailyft* reported that the earnings of Sri Lanka’s listed companies in the share-market increased by 73.7 billion rupees (\$US387 million) in the third quarter of this year, the highest for a three months period since late 2018. This “combined earning of companies reflected a 53 percent gain on a year-on-year basis and a massive 287 percent jump in comparison to the second quarter figure,” the newspaper stated.

The Rajapakse government is rapidly moving towards a presidential dictatorship in order to defend capitalism by crushing rising anti-government sentiment and impose the burden of the economic crisis accelerated by the global pandemic onto the working class and the poor.

Thousands of workers at Okaya, Next, Star, Smart and MAS companies have taken strike actions and protested against working in unsafe conditions and opposed cuts to their wages, jobs and bonuses. In contrast, the trade unions have responded by deepening their collaboration with employers and the government.

As members of the government’s “tripartite taskforce,” the unions regularly meet with the government and employers to discuss how best to defend big business while suppressing workers’ struggles.

Opposition parties, including the Samagi Jana Balavegaya, United National Party, Tamil National Alliance, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, along with various pseudo-left formations and the media, support the government’s response to the pandemic. This was graphically shown in their silent approval of Rajapakse’s Essential Services order against 15,000 port workers.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls on the working class to adopt a new strategy in order to protect the population from COVID-19 and to fight the government and employers attacks on jobs and wages.

Workers need to immediately form action committees, independent from trade unions, in every workplace and working-class neighbourhood.

These committees should demand the shutdown of all nonessential production and the establishment of modern and fully-funded health facilities to protect the lives of workers who are engaged in this essential work.

Health sector employees, including its frontline workers, must be immediately provided with all necessary resources and equipment to combat the pandemic. Workers from shutdown non-essential factories must be provided with full financial assistance.

Hundreds of thousands of workers, including many in the informal sector, have lost their jobs and income. These workers, along with the self-employed and small entrepreneurs, must also be given adequate income and financial support.

The Rajapakse regime, big business corporations, the opposition parties, media and the unions will oppose these basic demands as utopian and claim that there is no money.

However, this is the only realistic plan to save lives and defend the rights of working people and the poor. The necessary funds are there: the massive profits of corporates must be used to fund these measures; the massive amounts of money and tax breaks given to big business must be redirected to assist the poor; foreign loans to international financial institutions must be repudiated; and the government’s huge defence expenditure redirected to social welfare.

This involves a political fight against the profit system and for the banks, corporations and large estates to be brought under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class. The working class must rally the poor in the struggle for power and the establishment of a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement these socialist policies.

Sri Lankan workers can wage this fight only by uniting with the international working class. Already millions of workers in Italy, Germany, Spain, Portugal, the US and India are coming into struggle in defence of jobs, wages and health and safety. In the US, Amazon and auto sector workers have initiated rank-and-file committees.

In Sri Lanka, health and plantation sector workers have already formed action committees. The SEP has initiated four newsletters for the garment, health, immigrant and education sectors and held online meetings that are receiving encouraging support from workers and youth.

Workers need a revolutionary party to fight for this program. The SEP is building this party in Sri Lanka. We urge workers and youth to join its ranks.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact