

Sri Lanka: Stop the criminal mishandling of the pandemic! Lockdown the country with full compensation to those affected!

Statement of the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)

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As India is ravaged by a tsunami of the COVID-19 cases accounting for almost half of the global daily total, Sri Lanka is facing a new surge along with other countries in the region. Dr. Olivia Nieveras, officer-in-charge of the World Health Organization's Colombo office, last week urged Sri Lanka to take "the latest coronavirus surge seriously."

The new surge among the country's 22 million people has shattered repeated claims by President Gotabhaya Rajapakse that, unlike other countries, Sri Lanka has brought the pandemic under control.

For the first time, the official daily tally of infections has been near 2,000 for the past five days. Active cases have exceeded 16,000, overwhelming Sri Lanka's dilapidated health infrastructure. Total infections surpassed 117,000, as of yesterday, and the death toll has risen to 730.

From the beginning, Rajapakse put the military in charge, appointing Army Commander Shavendra Silva to head the pandemic task force. It ordered limited testing, ignoring the appeals of health experts for mass testing. Thus, the official figures have always been low, understating the actual situation.

Sri Lanka Medical Association head, Dr. Padma Gunaratne, told the media on Tuesday: "[W]hen 1,800 plus COVID patients are detected daily, there are three to four times that number undetected in the community." She and other medical experts earlier warned that the pandemic in Sri Lanka would rapidly become like that in India or Brazil.

The government ignored expert advice that the UK variant, which is 50 percent more contagious and 55 percent deadlier, has been spreading in the country since March. But Sri Lanka does not have the equipment available in the country to properly research about them.

In a statement on Thursday, Health Minister Pavithra Wanniarachchi revealed the very limited capacity of the country's hospitals, which have only 14,500 beds. Just 104 intensive care unit beds are allocated for the coronavirus patients with 64 high dependency units.

The army chief has announced that his task force has begun "transforming" abandoned apparel factories in suburban Colombo and remote areas into COVID-19 treatment centres. But these facilities will lack the necessary medical equipment and will further burden overstretched frontline health workers.

At the same time, there is a chronic lack of ambulances to transport patients. Thousands are staying at homes without proper care. Warnings have been made of a possible shortage of oxygen, which has taken many lives in India.

This rapid worsening is a result of the criminal policies of the Rajapakse government and the capitalist class as a whole. Even in the 16 months since the pandemic began, the government has taken no significant measures to overhaul the country's ramshackle health system.

The public health sector has been rundown during last 30 years as successive governments pursued open-market policies and opened up for private hospitals while spending massive sums on the three decades-long communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

Under Rajapakse, the 2021 health budget was cut by 28 billion rupees (\$US140 million) and only 10 billion rupees or 0.1 percent of gross domestic product was added for 2021 to contain the pandemic.

President Rajapakse issuing a statement on April 24 reassuring big business that he would not impose a national lockdown, saying "developing countries such as Sri Lanka cannot take lockdown measures or impose

curfews that obstruct the economic activities of the country.”

On March 19 last year, Rajapakse, facing mass concern and criticism over his response to the pandemic, reluctantly locked down the country for several weeks. A meagre social subsidy was paid to the starving needy. By contrast, Rajapakse ordered the Central Bank to provide at least 230 billion rupees in assistance to big business along with numerous other concessions.

Taking a leaf from the US and European governments, Rajapakse “reopened the economy” and declared that people must learn to “live with the pandemic.” This is nothing but the murderous “herd immunity” policy that puts profit before human life.

Addressing the Chamber of Commerce, the president urged investors to “take the opportunities” created by the pandemic. Jobs and wages have been slashed. At least 500,000 jobs have been destroyed, mainly in the informal sector. Another 500,000 people have been thrown into poverty. The country’s nine top business conglomerates, however, amassed more than 80 billion rupees in profit last year.

Amid resistance by workers as infection emerged in factories, the government has backed employers keeping them open. It reopened schools despite growing opposition by teachers, students and parents. To reinforce the illusion that the danger was over, the new-year celebrations in April were allowed to go ahead despite warnings from medical experts.

Rajapakse has cynically declared that the only solution to the pandemic is vaccination. However, only less than 2.4 percent have been vaccinated in the country. As in other poorer countries, the vaccination program in Sri Lanka is impeded not only by government policy, but also by the monopolization of vaccines by wealthy countries and the profiteering of the pharmaceutical giants producing the vaccines.

Amid widespread public anxiety, the government has been forced to lock down certain areas of the country. No factories or offices have been closed, however, despite the concerns of public health inspectors and calls by bank and postal workers. Protests emerged at the Benji garment factory in the rural Bingiriya area demanding its closure, after workers expressed reluctance to work amid virus infections.

Workers cannot rely on the Rajapakse government to take steps to protect their health and lives. Nor can they depend on the opposition—the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJP), Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, Tamil National

Alliance, pseudo-left groups and trade unions have all supported the reopening of the economy.

Workers must take matters into their own hands. Independent action committees should be established in every factory and neighbourhood to provide rallying points for youth and the rural masses.

The working class must insist on a total lockdown of all non-essential service and industries. Those working in essential services must be provided with proper protection from the virus.

Those who will lose jobs must be fully compensated. Poor farmers, fishermen and small businesses must be provided with social support.

All school must be kept closed and educators and students must be provided with the necessary facilities and equipment for online learning.

Billions of rupees must be allocated for the immediate overhauling of the health sector and providing the necessary protection for frontline workers.

Big business profits should be expropriated and used to fight the pandemic. Foreign loans must be repudiated and the money for repayments used to boost health services and provide social necessities for workers and the poor.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) stresses that the working class can only fight for these measures by mobilizing its independent strength as part of the broader struggle for socialist policies and for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement them.

The eradication of the pandemic is necessarily an international task that must be organized globally. On May Day 2021, the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) issued a call for an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees,” saying:

“The ICFI and its affiliated Socialist Equality Parties are advancing this initiative to begin and develop a global counteroffensive of the working class against the homicidal policies of the governments controlled by the capitalist ruling class, which are responsible for the worldwide catastrophe.”

The SEP in Sri Lanka calls upon workers to organize their own Action Committees and to join this international campaign.



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