

Sri Lankan government opposes national lockdown despite surging COVID-19 infections

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Coronavirus infections are surging to catastrophic levels in Sri Lanka with the total number of cases now more than 142,000—one third of these reported between May 2 and May 15—and over 962 deaths. Medical experts have noted, however, that the official figures are unreliable because of under counting.

Early this month, the Washington University-based Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) reported on the horrific global pandemic situation and noted the escalating COVID-19 case numbers in Sri Lanka.

The study predicted that the number of daily infections on the island would climb to 50,495 by June, the daily number of fatalities would be 224 by the end of that month, and the total number of deaths 20,876 by September 1. Its worst-case scenario forecast 30,132 deaths in September.

The study warned that Sri Lanka will need 17,045 more beds and called for the state health sector to increase its intensive care unit (ICU) capacity to 3,450.

Successive Sri Lankan governments have refused to properly fund the country's rundown state-sector health service. Currently there are only 147 ICU beds in hospitals and recently established intermediate facilities. State Minister for Health Sudarshini Fernandopulle told the media last week that "asymptomatic patients" will be "monitored" from home, starting today.

Hospitals are overcrowded and some of those with COVID-19 are dying at home without treatment. Medical authorities have also reported that six deadly variants of the virus have been now been discovered in Sri Lanka.

Despite this worsening situation, President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's government arrogantly refuses to initiate a national lockdown.

In April, Rajapakse declared that lockdowns were "not suitable" for developing countries and obstructed "economic activities." The ruling elites everywhere, whether in developed or so-called developing countries, pursue the same policy—profits must take precedence over human lives.

Rajapakse's National Operation Center for Prevention of COVID-19 (NOPCPC), which is headed by the Army Commander Shavendra Silva, has announced "small areas" will be isolated in order to avoid a national lockdown.

On May 10, Sri Lanka Medical Association (SLMA) officials met with Rajapakse, calling on him to take urgent measures. An SLMA press release said that "locking down smaller areas" was "unlikely to be effective in controlling the spread of infection." It warned that "COVID deaths may reach unprecedented levels" and the country face a "grave national catastrophe" if no effective action was taken.

The statement declared that "evidence from many countries shows that strict and immediate efforts to restrict movement of people are the only measure that quickly and drastically reduces the numbers of cases." Medical experts have also warned that Sri Lanka's limited health services and trained medical workers were at "breaking point."

NOPCPC chief Silva declared that there would only be "travel restrictions." These were imposed last Thursday night and continued until Monday morning. Starting today, however, these restrictions are only at night and up until May 31, and do not apply to employees, who continue working.

Silva told the apparel industry that it should continue operating while "adhering to strict COVID prevention guidelines." Silva's reference to strict guidelines is farcical. Workers are compelled to travel on crowded buses and labour in facilities without any social distancing.

Board of Investment (BOI) Chairman Sanjaya Mohottala said on Friday that company exports would "continue unabated amid the travel restrictions." He boasted that Sri Lankan exports crossed the \$US1 billion mark in March, for the first time since September 2020. He jubilantly predicted that the government would reach its target of \$12 billion in export earnings this year.

The cash-strapped Sri Lankan government, which is teetering on the brink of foreign debt default, is determined

to prevent any interruption in the operations and profits of the country's export industries.

The human cost of forcing employees to remain at work is indicated in the rapid increase in infections, particularly in garment factories. One recent report revealed that 217 workers out of 1,500 given PCR (polymerase chain reaction) tests at five garment factories in the Koggala Free Trade Zone were infected. The infected workers were directed to "quarantine" in their residences because health treatment centres in the area were too congested.

On May 11, 45 workers from Jolanka Manufacturing in southern Baddegama tested positive. The Norwood Fashion Wear and Kotmale VTM factories in the central hills district were also closed down after workers were discovered with the virus.

Anger erupted among Next Manufacturing's 2,000-strong workforce in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone after management refused to shut the factory when dozens of workers were found to be infected.

Company officials reacted to workers' concerns by declaring that the factory should not be closed when other companies were still operating. On May 10, management reluctantly shut the plant, but only after 100 workers had contracted the virus.

The Slimline Garment factory in Pannala was closed on April 28 following protests by the 5,000-strong workforce after hundreds were infected and one employee died at a quarantine centre. The plant is owned by MAS, a giant multinational that employs about 50,000 workers at different facilities across the island.

The trade unions have responded to the escalating crisis by doing their utmost to ensure uninterrupted production. Last year the unions fully supported the reopening of the economy and participated in "tripartite task force" negotiations with employers and the labour minister to discuss wage and job cuts at companies impacted by the pandemic.

In his May Day message, Free Trade Zone and General Workers Union Secretary Antony Marcus said he was disappointed President Rajapakse had ignored his letter appealing for vaccination priority to Sri Lankan workers. He also complained that companies and state officials had failed to heed the union's call for health action committees involving workers and management.

Marcus's appeals are aimed at dissipating the anger of workers, while the union deepens its collaboration with management to maintain production.

Sri Lanka's opposition parties, which are equally committed to defending big business profits, are backing the government while offering empty criticism about its "lapses" and mismanagement. They fear the new surge in

COVID-19 infections would provoke more anger in the working class.

On May 3, Sajith Premadasa, leader of Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB), the main parliamentary opposition party, declared: "We don't wish to make political gains from the pandemic or use COVID-19 as a political weapon. This is not the time for power struggles." Later, senior SJB leader Kabir Hashim called for an "all-party conference to manage effectively the COVID-19 crisis."

Tamil National Alliance MP M. A. Sumanthiran told parliament that harsh new laws should be introduced to restrict the movement of the people and called for the further involvement of private hospitals in the treatment of COVID-19 victims. While the government has already begun involving private hospitals, ordinary workers and the poor cannot afford the cost of treatment in these facilities.

Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) leader Anura Kumara Dissanayake said that the problem with controlling the pandemic was that it was being "operated under a single political power." He demanded the response "be brought under a collective political force." The JVP is calculating that this mechanism will allow them to more directly collaborate with the regime.

Not a single party has demanded the mobilisation of the resources required to rapidly improve the health services or close down non-essential services because such steps would affect big business profits.

In March and April last year these parties attended all-party conferences called by the Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse and pledged their political support. When Rajapakse "reopened the economy," they fully backed this dangerous move. Like the Rajapakse regime, these organisations are terrified by the inevitable eruption of working class and consequent political crisis.

As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) statement on May 7 declared, workers must take matters into their own hands and organise the fight against the criminal policies of the Rajapakse regime and the entire capitalist class on the basis of international socialist policies.



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