

Sri Lankan president imposes strikes ban on state-sector workers

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Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapakse issued an extraordinary gazette on Thursday, declaring that most state sectors were “essential services,” effectively banning all industrial action. The aim of the draconian order is to suppress the rising popular anger and unrest over deteriorating living conditions and the escalating attacks on democratic rights as COVID-19 infections rapidly increase across the country.

All ports, customs, petroleum, state railway and bus transport, administrative and welfare offices, state banking, including the Central Bank, and insurance services nationally, as well as waste management by local authorities, are now under Essential Public Services Act.

Under this law, any employee of these institutions who does not attend work faces “conviction, after summary trial before a Magistrate” and “liable to rigorous imprisonment” of two to five years and/or a fine of between 2,000 and 5,000 rupees (\$US11–\$US25) or both. 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.”

In addition, it is 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 anyone fighting to defend the democratic rights of those employees can be punished.

The immediate reason for Rajapakse’s decision appears to be in order to ban a planned national strike on Thursday by 12,000 government village officers, who are demanding COVID-19 vaccinations. However, the government’s draconian measure is to preempt strikes and protests over similar demands by broader sections of the working class.

Last November, Rajapakse promulgated an essential

service order on 15,000 port authority workers, after they began raising concerns and threatening industrial action over the danger of COVID-19 in their workplaces and the government’s privatisation measures. The strike ban on port workers was allowed to lapse after three months, but only after the trade unions temporarily dissipated workers’ protests.

Escalating COVID-19 infections, sharp price rises in food and other essentials, and the refusal of the government to provide adequate social relief or proper protection has seen the eruption of strikes and protests involving postal, railway, plantation, education, health and electricity workers in recent months.

While Sri Lanka officially recorded 94,949 COVID-19 cases between March 15, 2020 until April 15, these numbers, however, have spiked by 80 percent, up by 76,328, since then. These figures are a serious underestimate of the real situation because of low testing numbers.

The sudden rise in coronavirus infection numbers has shattered Rajapakse’s claims that the pandemic is under control and has heightened concerns by Sri Lankan workers, youth and the rural masses who are anxiously following the coronavirus disaster in India and globally.

Medical specialists in Sri Lanka and internationally have publicly warned that the island faces an impending “catastrophe” and called on Colombo to lockdown all non-essential services and rapidly overhaul the country’s rundown health services.

The government, which vehemently opposes any lockdown, has responded by imposing travel restrictions for two weeks, until June 7. President Rajapakse insists that the economy, and the export sector in particular, must remain open. Last week he banned health and other officials making media

statements about the pandemic unless authorised by him, because it might “panic people.”

Health workers, including attendants, nurses and doctors, are becoming increasingly angry over impossible workloads as hospitals are inundated with COVID-19 patients. Several health workers have died from the highly-infectious virus.

Hundreds of infections have been reported in garment factories, in and outside the country’s free trade zones (FTZ), some employing as many as 5,000 workers. In recent weeks several plants were forced to close in response to angry concerns by workers and nearby residents over the lack of COVID-19 safety measures.

Like every capitalist government around the world, the Rajapakse regime, which unwaveringly defends the profit interest of big business, insists that employees must keep working.

On May 4, Nimal Siripala de Silva, the labour minister, declared that garment bosses could cut workers’ wages by 50 percent and terminate them if their companies faced problems created by the pandemic.

Not a single opposition party or trade union has opposed Rajapakse’s draconian announcement on Thursday, a measure that directly affects the democratic rights of hundreds of thousands of state sector workers and anyone defending their right to take any industrial action. The same unions and political parties did not oppose the essential services order imposed on port workers last November.

This is no accident. These organisations have no fundamental differences with the Rajapakse government’s repressive measures and are dedicated to defending the profit system.

Earlier this month Samagi Jana Balawegaya, the main opposition party, urged the government to call an all-party conference on the worsening pandemic. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, declared that if the regime was not ready to work with the opposition a “broad-based mechanism” should be formed. Similar advice was offered by the Tamil National Alliance.

Like the Rajapakse government, these parties are acutely nervous about the developing mass opposition of the working class and the poor.

President Rajapakse has also reactivated its previously declared extraordinary gazette to mobilise Sri Lanka’s armed forces to “maintain law and order”

in the country’s 25 districts. These forces and the police who are now patrolling the streets, will be mobilised against the working class and the poor as they come into struggle.

The working class must take these developments seriously. The Rajapakse government, aided and abetted by the opposition parties and the trade unions, is intensively stepping up its preparations for all-out class war.

The working class can only defend its democratic and social rights by breaking from the unions and independently mobilising its industrial and political strength against the government attacks. This requires building action committees in every workplace as part of the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government based on socialist and internationalist policies.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is the only organisation that fights for this perspective. All those that agree with this program should register and attend Sunday’s online public meeting “The coronavirus pandemic in India and need for a socialist strategy” at 6 p.m., Indian Standard Time, to discuss these vital issues.



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