The pandemic has starkly revealed that the unions are organically bound to the capitalist class and its state

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The following speech was delivered by SEP (Sri Lanka) Political Committee member M. Thevarajah to a meeting organized by the SEP (Sri Lanka), "The Covid-19 pandemic and the need for a socialist strategy *." The meeting, directed to workers and youth in Sri Lanka, India and throughout South Asia, was held on May 30.*

Comrades,

This meeting to discuss the pandemic and the necessity of a socialist strategy is a significant step in the struggle for the unification of international working class against the devastation being caused by capitalism.

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered struggles in the US, Europe, India, Sri Lanka and elsewhere to resist the corporations and the governments that are pursuing criminal policies based on prioritising profit before human lives.

It is crucial in this situation to rally to the call made by the International Committee of the Fourth International on May Day for an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

Building of rank-and-file committees in workplaces in every country and their international alliance will provide a path for the working class to develop a counter-offensive against the attack unleashed by the capitalist class.

The right-wing Bharatiya Janatha Party-led government in India is sacrificing lives of workers to the raging pandemic in order to defend the profit interests of rapacious international and local investors. The social opposition of the multi-million workers in India is rapidly growing against this reckless and murderous policy.

Last week, the Hyundai Motor and Renault-Nissan multinational plants in the Sriperumbudur-Oragadam industrial belt in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu were forced to close as the workers' unrest erupted. They protested against the unsafe dangerous working condition caused by the lack of COVID-19 protection, as hundreds were infected and nearly 20 deaths reported.

More than 20 workers have died during the recent surge in COVID-19 infections in Gurgaon, in another industrial belt. These include five workers at Maruti Suzuki's plant in Gurgaon, two workers at a Honda plant and one worker at the Tata Motors facility.

The Modi government has begun reopening the economy since the end of April and used the pandemic to rush through the pro-investor program of the ruling class. Last October his government passed laws easing the use of contract labour in every sector. Farm bills were passed to open the vast agriculture sector to multinational agribusinesses.

Although no records are available, reports suggest that thousands of deaths have occurred among workers and hundreds of thousands have been infected. Hundreds of thousands more have lost their jobs. The mass of migrant workers, who have no permanent jobs, have been badly hit.

However, the Modi regime is not ready to close down non-essential industries and services to save lives. His policy is "save India from lockdown" so as to create the best conditions for extracting profits from workers.

Strikes and protests have erupted across India over terrible working conditions, poverty-level wages, the loss of jobs and lack of personal protective equipment. On November 26 last year, tens of millions of workers

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joined a one-day national strike to oppose new labour laws and demand social support for those who have lost their income due to the pandemic. Farmers, who began protesting against the farm laws last November, are continuing their action.

However, as in every country, workers confront the trade unions, which are blocking their struggles. In India, the pro-capitalist unions, including the Centre for Indian Trade Unions led by the Stalinist Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM), have suppressed and betrayed all the workers' struggles by keeping them within the capitalist framework.

Instead of challenging the devastation caused to workers' jobs, wages, and, above all, lives by the pandemic, the unions are, in fact, backing the policy of the government and capitalist class to keep businesses open.

The same is true throughout South Asia. In this regard, I would like to briefly explain the situation in Sri Lanka.

President Gotabhaya Rajapakse on Thursday issued a draconian essential services order covering almost all state sectors, including the ports, petroleum, electricity, the Central Bank and other state banks, bus and railway transport. The immediate reason was a strike by 12,000 government village officers demanding vaccinations. However, the government fears that it would lead to an eruption of struggles against worsening living conditions and the burdens of the pandemic.

Not a single trade union has opposed the essential services order, which mandates harsh penalties for industrial action.

Unions are directly collaborating with the policy of the government and employers to reopen the economy. Workplaces, particularly the garment factories, have become hotbeds of COVID-19 infections. Thousands of workers have been infected and several workers have died.

On Thursday the Free Trade Zone and General Services Employees Union leader, Anthony Marcus, declared that his union supports setting up intermediate hospitals for sick workers while the rest continue to go to work.

Ceylon Workers' Congress leader Jeevan Thondaman, who is also a minister of the Rajapakse government, last week told the plantation workers: "Don't be scared about COVID-19. You should use both hands and pluck tea leaves. If you raise income you will be able to earn." That is how the unions are dedicated to fattening the purses of companies.

Early this year his union directly conspired with the Alton estate company and police to frame up dozens of workers and to sack 38 workers. Only the Socialist Equality Party opposed this witch hunt and is fighting to defend them, demanding the release of those charged and the reinstatement of sacked workers.

The pandemic has starkly revealed that these unions are organically bound to the capitalist class and its state.

Workers can only fight for their rights, including their health and their lives, if they break from the trade unions, which are dedicated to defending the capitalist profit system. They need to build rank-and-file committees in every factory and workplace, independent of the trade unions. Only then can workers mobilise their independent strength to fight back against the policies of the government and big business.

The struggle against the pandemic can only be carried out as a global fight. As the International Committee of the Fourth International, its Socialist Equality Parties and the *World Socialist Web Site* have explained, the pandemic knows no national borders.

Workers are facing the common threat of capitalism, which is in its death agony and need to unite internationally. To do this, workers must reject every form of communalism and nationalism that is whipped up by the capitalist classes and their governments to divide and paralyse the working class.

We urge workers in India, Sri Lanka and throughout the region to join the struggle to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. This is completely bound up with the fight for an international socialist program and the building of the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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