

Sri Lankan state employees ordered back to work amid rising COVID-19 infections

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Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse has ignored the warnings of medical experts about rising coronavirus infections, including from the Delta variant, and ordered all state employees to return to their workplaces on Monday. Limited numbers of state employees were previously allowed to work from home on a rotational basis.

A statement from the president's office said: "Since the majority of public servants have also been vaccinated, the priority should be given to restore normalcy to the public service."

P. B. Jayasundera, the president's secretary, directed the public services ministry to revoke all circulars relating to work from home, declaring that the rotation system "does not provide efficient service to the people."

Facilitating this move, state health authorities on Sunday removed an inter-provincial travel ban. The government had previously removed all health restrictions on private sector industries, allowing companies to demand all employees to return to their workplaces.

President Rajapakse's declarations about "restoring normalcy" to the public service has nothing to do with the welfare of workers and the poor. His return-to-work directive is to boost big-business profits and drive up exports and foreign exchange to service the country's huge external debt repayments, currently averaging \$US4 billion annually for the next four years.

Colombo's decision is in direct defiance of new health alerts from the World Health Organization (WHO). On Sunday, the agency reported that globally there were almost 4 million COVID-19 cases, including the Delta variant, last week.

"We have the tools to stop this virus," WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said, "but on current trends, we expect the total number of cases to pass 200 million within the next two weeks."

A related Twitter message from the WHO's Sri Lankan office stated: "COVID-19 cases are rising globally, including in Sri Lanka. WHO cautions this is driven by the highly transmissible Delta variant, increased social

mixing/mobility, inconsistent PHSM (Personal Health Management System) and inequitable vaccination. Hard-won gains are in jeopardy and health systems are being overwhelmed."

These concerns were echoed by expert Dr. Malik Peiris at an online meeting last week organised by the Sri Lanka Science Foundation. "As a public health professional, I would be remising my duty if I don't warn that Sri Lanka is going to have the worse COVID-19 outbreak in the months ahead," he said.

Asked to respond, Dr. Hemantha Herath, Sri Lanka's deputy director general of the health service, admitted to a spike in cases but added, "Any lockdown will have a major impact on the economy."

Herath, who is the Sri Lankan health official allowed to publicly comment on COVID-19, insisted that responsibility for reducing infections lay with the people, who "should be more and more responsible in adhering to public health measures." His comments were simply a repeat of what the president declared early last month. "To face the pandemic, the only solution is the vaccination...Without opening the country we cannot sustain the economy," Rajapakse said.

On Tuesday, the total number of coronavirus infections climbed to 316,192, with daily cases at around 1,500 for July. This week, daily cases sharply increased to 2,500. The daily death toll has seen similar increases with 74 on Monday, driving up the total to 4,645, since the pandemic began. These official figures are based on daily PCR (polymerase chain reaction) tests between of 10,000 and 15,000, which are far less than the number repeatedly suggested by independent health experts.

Dr G. Wijesuriya, director of the Lady Ridgeway Children's Hospital in Colombo, has reported rising numbers of COVID-19 infected children. The hospital is currently treating 70 children. "It used to be around five cases a day, but now we're confirming 15 to 20 patients a day," he told the media. "All six of our intensive care unit (ICU) beds are full. We don't have the capacity to treat all these patients," he said, explaining that some children had

been transferred to other hospitals.

Other hospitals treating pandemic patients are being overwhelmed because of inadequate numbers of beds and rising demand for oxygen. The *Daily Mirror* reported on August 4 that hospitals in the Western Province were at capacity and about 65 percent of COVID-19 patients presently were oxygen-dependent.

Conditions at the Sri Lanka National Hospital (NHSL) in Colombo, the country's premier health facility, have dramatically worsened. Early last week, it recorded 200 patients per day, 100 of them requiring oxygen supply support. Currently there are 610 COVID positive patients at the hospital.

Growing numbers of frontline health workers are being infected. According to one report last week, 52 NHSL health workers tested positive for COVID-19 with fears that this is seriously impacting services at the facility.

The health ministry's epidemiology unit claims that 72.3 percent of the population over 30 years of age has received first doses of the vaccine, saying it to be one of the highest rates in the world for this age group.

These figures, however, are not reliable. According to Reuters' COVID-19 vaccination tracking, 46.2 percent of the Sri Lankan's total population has received one dose and only 10.3 percent are fully vaccinated.

The government is desperate to drive up vaccinations, not to save lives but to provide a pretext for lifting all remaining health restrictions. The Sri Lankan government, like its counterparts around the world, is attempting to condition the population to rising numbers of COVID-19 infections and deaths, placing profit above human lives.

Major garment factories and large companies employing thousands of workers have become major COVID-19 infection centres, spreading the deadly virus among workers and their families. Most workers use packed buses and trains to reach their overcrowded workplaces, where health protection measures are limited or non-existent, and social distancing is impossible.

Jubilant about the government's actions, a Ceylon Chamber of Commerce delegation met with Rajapakse last week. It assured the president that "it was eager to promote a number of sectors, including exports and tourism, as soon as the country returns to normalcy with its vaccination drive." The delegation said its members would "take advantage of this, and contribute to the rapid development of the economy."

From the very outset of the pandemic, the Rajapakse regime has been entirely preoccupied with the impact of the coronavirus on big business, with the president and others using nationalist demagoguery to divert attention from his administration's indifference towards workers and the poor.

On 17 March 2020, he told the Colombo media: "Other countries may have the best medical facilities but we managed to cure infected people, through our efforts."

While Rajapakse was forced to impose a national lockdown on March 20 last year it began removing restrictions and reopening the economy in mid-April. Since then his government has opposed a national lockdown, ignoring rising case numbers and urgent appeals by medical experts. Sri Lanka's parliamentary opposition parties—the Samagi Jana Balawegaya, United National Party, Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna and the Tamil National Alliance—are all backing the government's big-business policies.

The sudden rise of COVID-19 infections in the past two weeks, along with warnings from the WHO and other experts, means that Sri Lanka faces a medical and social catastrophe. The criminal reaction of the government, and its call for the masses to "live with the virus," requires an independent political response by the working class.

All non-essential factories and workplaces and schools must be closed down. Workers in non-essential services must be provided with full income compensation and all those employed in essential services provided with full health protection.

In order to fight for this program, workers must break from pro-capitalist trade unions and establish their own independent action committees. This struggle has to be connected with the immediate investment of billions of rupees in the health sector to protect frontline workers, update and advance health facilities and fully vaccinate the masses. This perspective can only be carried out in the fight for socialist policies.

As the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and all its national sections have insisted that no country is immune from the pandemic until it is eradicated globally. For this, the efforts of international working class must be coordinated on the basis of international socialist program. There is no national solution to the pandemic.



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