

# Build action committees to fight the Sri Lankan ruling elite's homicidal response to the coronavirus pandemic!

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)  
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Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse last week again rejected calls by independent health experts for a national lockdown and other serious measures to combat the rapidly spreading coronavirus pandemic and its deadly Delta variant.

The Rajapakse regime is following the same policy as its global counterparts—in the US, the UK, Brazil, India, and other countries—that the maintenance of the capitalist economy and boosting of big-business profits must take the precedence over human life.

Last week, a World Health Organization (WHO)-sponsored group of medical experts submitted a report to the government warning that its inadequate minimal mobility restrictions would result in around 30,000 cumulative deaths by January 2022.

“[O]ur urgent priority is to save lives,” the experts group said, and recommended “strictly enforced movement restrictions, including inter-district travel, except for essential services,” “enforcement of a curfew for a short period” and other measures. These proposals, they said, would help save 18,000 deaths by January 2022. If not implemented, the overburdened country’s health system would collapse, making matters even worse, it warned.

Amid repeated calls and rising mass anger, the Rajapakse government has imposed a night curfew—from 10 p.m. to 4 a.m.—starting yesterday, along with some limited travel restrictions. This is a face-saving measure and does not affect big business activities.

Even the limited official statistics on COVID-19 point to an impending catastrophe. The official death count has since August 1 increased by more than 1,700 to 6,263, with the number of infections climbing by 50,000 to 362,074 in the same period.

These figures, however, are not an accurate reflection of the real situation because the government is deliberately keeping the number of PCR (polymerase chain reaction) tests below required levels. It has been revealed that thousands of those infected in some districts have not been included in the official statistics.

From the outset of the pandemic, every capitalist party, and the pliant media, along with the trade unions and pseudo-left groups in Sri Lanka, have supported the Rajapakse government’s response to the coronavirus, including its reopening of the economy. These organisations are now making timid criticisms of the government in order to dissipate the outrage of workers and the poor over its criminal mishandling of the health catastrophe.

Like its international counterparts, the Rajapakse government declares that “the economy has to function in the new normal” and people must “learn to live with virus.” In April, President Rajapakse

declared that “developing countries cannot afford lockdowns.”

The government’s principal concern has been the global impact of the pandemic on the Sri Lankan economy which has seen a drastic decline of exports and remittances, a collapse of tourism and deteriorating economic growth.

The Rajapakse regime has injected billions of rupees to protect big business, providing cheap credit and tax concessions. Teetering on the brink of debt default, Colombo has obtained more foreign loans in order to repay existing debt, while imposing the economic burden of the crisis on the backs of the people.

Employees were ordered to return to work after a brief one-month lockdown in mid-March last year, allowing export-producing plants, particularly garment companies, to open. With minimal or no health safety measures in these workplaces, thousands of workers were infected.

In May and June this year, the government was forced to impose travel restrictions but lifted these on July 5. On July 28, it called ordered all state employees working from home to return to their workplaces, ignoring warnings about the newly emerging and highly-infectious Delta variant.

About half a million jobs have been wiped out in the tourism sector in the last 18 months, with similar numbers in the informal sector. With the support of the government and trade unions, big business has retrenched many workers, cut wages and extended working hours in violation of existing labour laws.

Sri Lanka’s hospitals and improvised intermediate coronavirus centres are already overflowing. Thousands of COVID-19 patients have been forcibly kept in so-called home-based treatment without proper medical care.

Hospital wards allocated for the infected have become hellholes with patients everywhere on the floors and corridors and using uncleaned toilets. State-run hospitals have had to create more wards for coronavirus patients, posing the danger of death among those suffering from other diseases. Medical oxygen is in short supply, raising the prospect of even more fatalities.

The Lady Ridgeway Hospital, Colombo’s main children’s hospital, is overloaded with coronavirus-infected children. Parents have been advised to keep “mildly” infected children in “home care.” This means that children are now facing other deadly diseases, such as Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome/MIS-C. Currently 34 children are suspected victims of this disease, and one has died.

The country’s limited public health system—rundown through the open-market policies of consecutive governments over the past four

decades—is on the brink of collapse. Overworked health employees are fighting for safe working conditions, personal protective equipment, and even adequate masks. Around 2,000 ancillary health workers, 1,000 nurses, 600 family health workers and several doctors are infected with COVID-19 and some deaths have been reported.

Several hospitals in Colombo and surrounding suburbs have reported that their mortuaries are full and are storing dead bodies in outside freezers. Several crematoriums are working round the clock.

President Rajapakse insists that the “solution” to the pandemic is “vaccination.” While vaccinations are crucial in combating the pandemic, Rajapakse’s constant use of the “vaccination” mantra is not out of sympathy for the people but to ensure the economy and profit-making continues. Thus far, health authorities have only been able to fully vaccinate less than 20 percent of the population.

The Rajapakse government is also willfully ignoring the fact that in the US, and other countries, where half of the population has been vaccinated, there is a spike of infections, including from the Delta variant, and rising death tolls.

Sri Lanka and other poor countries face another problem: profit hungry pharmaceutical corporations in the US and the UK are limiting their supplies of vaccines to these under-developed nations.

Nervous about the unfolding crisis, Sri Lanka’s parliamentary “opposition parties”—the Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB), United National Party (UNP), Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Tamil National Alliance (TNA)—last year rushed into an all-party conference called by Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse and expressed their support. They also supported Rajapakse’s dangerously premature reopening the economy.

Over the past two weeks, the SJB, UNP and JVP have called for a national lockdown. When this was rejected by the government, the SJB and the JVP are now calling on people to self-isolate. The UNP is appealing to Rajapakse to initiate joint talks with all parties, priests from all religions and businessmen. They are not proposing the closure of non-essential factories. All these parties fear that the unfolding health and social crisis will lead to social explosion.

At the same time, the Rajapakse government is rapidly moving towards a presidential dictatorship based on the military and extreme-right Sinhala Buddhist extremist organisations. The government has imposed draconian essential public services laws, banning strikes and protests by most of the state sector workforce, while army, air force and navy personnel have been placed on standby in every district since April. None of the opposition parties has opposed these moves.

The fake-left Frontline Socialist Party has urged the government to impose a lockdown. At the same time, it has called for a 1 percent tax on big companies and the formation of village-level committees to collaborate in dealing with the pandemic. They are determined to block any independent intervention by the working class to deal with the crisis.

The working class must decisively reject the government’s policies of placing profits before human lives and the desperate efforts of the opposition parties to prop up the government.

Employees in every workplace and factory need to organise action committees, independent of the unions. They must demand a national lockdown of the country, a halt to all non-essential work, with full compensation for all employees in these factories. Proper health and safety protection should be provided to all workers involved in essential work.

Self-employed workers must be provided with an adequate living allowance and other necessary support. Self-employed small traders,

three-wheel drivers, farmers and fishermen should also be given adequate social support.

Billions of rupees must be made available for a massive and urgently needed overhaul of the health sector with the provision of new equipment and infrastructure.

Strikes, protests and demonstrations involving workers in the health, plantations railways and education sectors have erupted in recent weeks. More than 200,000 teachers and principals are involved in an “online learning” strike, now entering its second month. These struggles have erupted because of decades-long accumulated social problems that have worsened because of the pandemic.

While workers have shown their social power in these struggles they must take the political initiative, break from the trade unions and capitalist parties and build independent action committees, rallying young people and the poor to fight for the policies outlined above.

The capitalist class and its government say there is no money even as it is taking every measure to boost profits and repay foreign debts. Last year, Sri Lanka’s largest nine companies earned 80 billion rupees (\$US400 million) in profit while workers faced devastating conditions. Every day, the media reports huge profits by the major companies and the banks. There is the money.

All the funds being handed out to fatten big business must be redirected to building urgent health facilities and provide social support for workers and the poor. The foreign debt must be repudiated.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) insists that this struggle must be linked to the fight for socialist policies. The large estates, companies and banks must be nationalised under the democratic control of the working class. This is the only way to reorganise the economy for the majority, not for the profits of a few. Such a program requires the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government.

The SEP has always explained that this is an international struggle. The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and the *World Socialist Web Site* have pointed out that the pandemic is a trigger event that has deepened the crisis of the global capitalism.

The coordinated effort of the international working class is necessary to mobilise scientific know how and resources in the fight for eradication of the pandemic.

That is why the ICFI has called for forming an International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees by building action committees in every country. The SEP is fighting for this program in Sri Lanka and in South Asia.

The SEP urges workers and young people to discuss this program, establish their own action committees and take forward this the international campaign.



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