

# Defend Sri Lankan workers against Rajapakse's state of emergency!

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The draconian state of emergency proclaimed by Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse on August 30 must be taken as a warning to workers not only in Sri Lanka, but around the world. Facing an upsurge of the COVID-19 pandemic and a growing international economic crisis, the capitalist class is setting up a dictatorship to try to crush the rising working class struggles.

Rajapakse imposed the state of emergency amid a fall of the Sri Lankan rupee, food shortages and massive price increases for key food items. A kilogram of rice and sugar have doubled to 250 and 220 rupees, respectively. Shoppers wait in long queues to purchase sugar from state-owned Cooperative Wholesale Establishment shops. Rajapakse claims the state of emergency will ensure “public security and well-being, and the maintenance of supplies and services essential to the life of the community.” However, it in fact authorizes an extraordinary crackdown on workers and the rural poor.

It grants Rajapakse far-reaching dictatorial powers to take any measures “as appear to him to be necessary or expedient in the interests of public security and the preservation of public order, and the suppression of mutiny, riot or civil commotion, or for the maintenance of supplies and services essential to the life of the community.” Rajapakse can thus amend or suspend laws, ban strikes or other struggles, proscribe political parties, and censor the media.

Even before this, Rajapakse had enacted repressive laws, like the Essential Public Service Act, declared on May 27 and renewed last week, which bans strikes in virtually the entire public sector, or nearly one million workers. He has also appointed several former and in-service military officers to top civilian posts. While schools are closed, most workplaces, especially export

industries like the garment industry, are considered “essential” and remain open as the island faces a Delta-variant driven surge of COVID-19 infections. As a result, according to undercounted official figures in Sri Lanka, overall cases have surpassed 488,000 and the total death toll 11,000.

These reactionary measures have been met, however, by a rising tide of workers' struggles. For over two months, about 250,000 public school teachers have been striking to demand higher salaries. Previously, workers in health, postal, railway, ports, power, tourism and garment sectors have held strikes and protests against economic hardship and unsafe health conditions in the pandemic. Unrest is mounting among petroleum workers over cuts to overtime and wages.

Rajapakse has now responded by intensifying his drive towards a presidential dictatorship resting on the military and right-wing, fascist elements. The Sri Lankan ruling elite is especially concerned that the growing working class struggles are drawing together Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim workers, thereby undermining the communal divisions it has systematically incited and stoked to safeguard its rule.

Against increasing threats of state violence and repression, the critical task is to politically mobilize the working class and arm it with an understanding of the situation it faces. Above all, this means explaining that the best allies of workers in Sri Lanka are the workers in other countries and around the world. Indeed, the developing class struggles in Sri Lanka are part of an international upsurge of the working class.

Workers in various sectors, including health, education, transport and auto in the US, Europe, India, Australia and New Zealand have engaged in struggles, including strikes and protests over better wages and conditions and against unsafe health conditions during

the COVID-19 pandemic. This is the force that must be mobilized to defend their Sri Lankan brothers and sisters in the struggle against the Rajapakse government's draconian threats.

In every country, workers face the same essential problems—the same refusal to mount a scientifically-based fight to eradicate the COVID-19 pandemic, and the same turn to dictatorship by the ruling elite.

Former US President Donald Trump, abetted by the Republican Party and sections of the military and police, is openly promoting a fascist movement. This led to the events of January 6, when mobs of his fascist supporters stormed the Capitol, trying to block Congress certification of Joe Biden's election victory. Although the January 6 coup attempt failed, fascist forces around Trump are continuing their plots and are in contact with Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, who is calling for a far-right coup to topple his factional opponents in the judiciary and the political establishment.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) government is whipping up chauvinism and far-right forces against Muslims and other minorities in order to divide and weaken the working class.

Sri Lanka's history has shown time and again that in countries of belated capitalist development, the capitalist class is organically incapable of establishing a democratic regime. Only the independent revolutionary intervention of the working class, rallying the broader oppressed masses, can resolve these issues through a struggle for socialism that is international in scope. This was elaborated by Leon Trotsky, the co-leader of October 1917 Russian Revolution with V. I. Lenin, in the theory of Permanent Revolution.

Sri Lanka has been ruled under emergency law for much of the three-quarters of a century since it became formally independent from Britain in 1948. The Sri Lankan bourgeoisie imposed a state of emergency to forestall or try to crush every great historic eruption of opposition by workers and the rural poor. This included the 1953 Hartal (a general strike and business shutdown), the 1971 rural youth rebellion, and the nearly 30-year anti-Tamil racialist war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1983-2009.

The current state of emergency has been imposed

under qualitatively changed conditions, with a far more intense economic and political crisis of global capitalism. In every country, bourgeois rule is discredited by the ruling elites' criminal and murderous policies towards the pandemic, which placed the profits of the corporate and financial oligarchy above human lives. Globally, total reported coronavirus cases have risen to over 227 million and total deaths are above 4.6 million. Statistical estimates cited by Britain's *Economist* magazine show over 15 million have died of COVID-19.

Every faction of the ruling class, Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim alike, are implicated in this horrific policy and the turn to dictatorship.

Opposition parties like the Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB), Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Tamil National Alliance (TNA), while making token criticisms of Rajapakse's state of emergency, are silent on the threats to the democratic rights of working and toiling people. The United National Party (UNP) has not even bothered to criticize Rajapakse, tacitly backing his dictatorial moves. All these parties, as participants or supporters of past governments, have a long record of endorsing emergency rule and other repressive laws and IMF austerity measures against working people.

The great task is to politically arm and unify an international political vanguard as the working class enters into a direct political struggle against bourgeois rule. In particular, this means unifying Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers against the policies of austerity and dictatorship epitomized by the Rajapakse government. Above all, this means a struggle to establish the unity of workers in Sri Lanka with their class brothers and sisters in South Asia and internationally.

The construction of an International Workers Alliance of Rank and File Committees, as called for by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), is a crucial step in building this unity of the international working class in struggle.



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