

Sri Lankan workers and youth speak out against new emergency law

Our reporters

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A repressive emergency law proclaimed by Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse on August 30 was rushed through parliament two weeks ago, with the support of the majority of the ruling party and only token criticism from the opposition parties.

The government claims the law is “to ensure public security and well-being, and the maintenance of supplies and services essential to the life of the community.” It used recent food shortages and the doubling of the price of rice and sugar as pretexts for the legislation.

As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warned in its statement “Oppose Sri Lankan president’s repressive state of emergency,” the laws are in fact directed against rising opposition from the working class and the poor, as the government imposes the burden of the country’s economic crisis on the backs of ordinary people.

The SEP has received a strong response from workers, students and young people in discussions about the repressive character of the legislation and the need to politically organise against it.

Ruchira, a public school teacher who is participating with his colleagues in a protracted strike for higher wages, noted that the government imposed the emergency laws despite the fact that current legislation is sufficient to guarantee the supply of essential food and to control prices. This demonstrated that the measure was part of a broader attack on democratic rights.

“When I heard that the state of emergency had been proclaimed, what immediately came to my mind is that police would get the power to take anybody into custody at any time,” Ruchira said. “I think the government will first launch victimisations against the teachers’ struggle in order to intimidate other workers. The working class should believe in its strength as a class and fight government repression.”

A **technical officer** in the building sector explained that the danger posed by the laws could only be understood in

the context of the country’s historical experience.

“As I know, governments have previously banned films using emergency laws,” he said. “Especially these days, we see there is a victimisation against social media activists on the pretext that they distribute fake news. On all these occasions we can see that the government is not ready to tolerate even mild criticisms against it. The government will definitely increase these types of attacks under the state of emergency.”

A **welfare worker** at Colombo Port told SEP members: “This emergency law has been passed as the struggles of workers, such as teachers and the students, are developing.”

He explained the explosive situation at the port where the government is preparing to sell property belonging to the Port Authority as a part of a privatisation drive.

“Already at the port, permanent jobs have been reduced, and there has been increased exploitation of manpower [contract] staff. Workers have been ordered to vacate their quarters by November. The government has brought this repressive law in because it knows that port workers will enter into struggle soon. I agree with the SEP statement. If the workers want to win these struggles, they should build their own action committees.”

The Teacher-Student-Parent Safety Committee (TSPSC), built with the political guidance of the SEP, discussed the party statement at a meeting last Wednesday. One teacher expressed strong agreement that the laws were part of an escalating class war, commenting, “The government is getting prepared to crush the struggles in the future, even before they emerge. It warns workers that ‘we have sharpened every weapon against you, as you stand against us.’”

The teacher noted that workers were not yet ready to face this situation. They needed to build action committees, develop widespread discussions within them and understand the extent of the danger. “The only way

forward for workers to face the government's attacks is to harness their own independent strength," he said.

T. Savarimuttu, a retired plantation worker, rejected the government's claim that the state of emergency was to ensure that people had enough to eat.

He described the increasingly dire conditions for workers and their families in the plantation sector who were having difficulties purchasing food, especially with the doubling of prices for essential items. The meagre wages given to the highly exploited workers were not sufficient to keep up with the inflation.

Savarimuttu explained how he was a victim of the emergency law, which was imposed to attack the Tamil masses and working class as a whole during the communal war waged by successive governments in Sri Lanka against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eeem (LTTE).

"I was arrested by Hatton police in March 1996, under the false charges that I supported the LTTE and was detained in the Lindula police station for five months. After that I was transferred to Welikada prison in Colombo and released after 18 months. The danger of this emergency law is that suspects could be kept in jail for a long time without any charges like I was. I feel such a situation is coming back."

Nuwan, a construction worker, said he experienced the horrors of the state of emergency as a young man during the bloody repression unleashed by the then United National Party (UNP) government against rural youth in 1988-89.

"At that time, the UNP government committed major crimes against the people, including killing a large number of youth under the guise of a state of emergency. The police and the army conducted frightening search operations in which many suspects went missing and were killed by paramilitary groups. There were dead bodies everywhere on the roads."

Dinusha, a graduate from the University of Kelaniya, said the government was nervous about the growing popular anger, which it was seeking to suppress with the draconian laws.

"The government's preparations for attacks on workers demonstrates their bankruptcy, not their strength," he said. "When the unlimited powers that are centered in the president's hands through the state of emergency are understood, it is clear that the aim of these laws is to crush working-class struggles, including protests. A teachers struggle is already underway. Petroleum and health care workers are entering into struggles. Graduate unemployed

youth are enraged."

Dinusha accused the so-called opposition parties of covering up the danger of these emergency laws. "While the government has unleashed this type of attack, these parties are talking about other things," he said. "[JVP leader] Anura Kumara Disanayake groans in the parliament. [Pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party leader] Pubudu Jayagoda holds media briefings. There also, they speak about other things, while the real issues facing the masses are concealed."

Dinusha recalled how these parties diverted popular opposition towards the Mahinda Rajapakse regime in 2015 behind the installation of the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government, which also carried out significant attacks on civil liberties.

Karunatileka, a retired worker from Tobacco Company, said the government claims that the state of emergency was imposed to "supply essential supplies and service for public life" were a "joke." He added, "What actually happens is the government purchases from the big businesses at higher prices, even though they are said to have hidden food." This had contributed to skyrocketing costs for food items, including staples such as lentils and rice.

"Looking at how the government has already launched repression against journalists and social media activists who express oppositional views, we can have an understanding of the preparations for even more repressive rule. I can recall how the Sirima Bandaranaike government used emergency laws to crush a youth rebellion in 1971. Learning from past experiences, the workers should prepare to face this attack strongly. The SEP campaign plays a crucial part in it."



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