

Sri Lankan plantation workers oppose Rajapakse government's emergency laws

Our correspondents
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Workers and youth across Sri Lanka have spoken in support of the Socialist Equality Party's campaign against President Rajapakse's declaration on August 30 of a state of emergency.

The SEP is the only organisation fighting to independently mobilise the working class against the emergency laws and other repressive measures by the Rajapakse government. As part of its fight against the anti-democratic state of the emergency the party is holding an online meeting on Sunday, October 10 at 4 p.m., Sri Lankan time.

Early last month, the SEP issued a powerful statement entitled "Oppose Sri Lankan president's repressive state of emergency!" It explained that the real target of these measures is the working class and rural poor now coming into struggle against the government's intensified attacks on social and democratic rights.

One month after declaring a state of emergency, the pretext used by the government—"to ensure public security and well-being, and the maintenance of supplies and services essential to the life of the community"—has been widely exposed as fraud. Last week the Rajapakse government cancelled a September 2 gazette notification imposing a maximum price on rice.

While Rajapakse's state of emergency needs to be extended by the parliament in the coming days, the government has not yet commented publicly on it. Rajapakse desperately needs the extension in order to try and suppress rising opposition in the working class which has intensified over the last month as reflected in last week's five-hour strike of 90,000 health workers.

School teachers are also continuing their more than three-month online learning strike to demand higher salaries. Public Security Minister Sarath Weerasekara

has responded by threatening teachers, and the rest of the working class, declaring that the teachers' action should be suppressed, like the government's defeat of "terrorism"—a chilling reference to Colombo's bloody war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The SEP's campaign against the state of emergency is receiving significant support from workers in various sectors, including from the education, health services and plantations action committees established under the party's guidance.

Last week the SEP statement was unanimously adopted at a meeting of the Glenugie Estate Plantation Workers Action Committee in the island's major plantation district.

During the meeting workers explained the harsh working conditions they now face as companies and estate managers cut workers' salaries and push daily workload targets to unbearable back-breaking levels.

One worker said: "We have faced severe difficulties during the pandemic but the meagre salaries we earn are not enough to survive on. The companies have continuously refused to increase our wages."

When workers have entered into struggle with a determination to change this situation, he continued, management, with support from the police, have unleashed severe repression against us.

"The police have threatened us, claiming that we don't have a right to protest during the pandemic. This kind of repression will be intensified under the emergency laws. I think they already have the power to arrest us now," he said and emphasised the urgent need to fight these laws.

Another worker said that the government had falsely claimed the emergency laws were necessary in order to provide essential food items to the people, many of

whom are facing starvation during this COVID-19 pandemic and with the price of essentials doubling.

He also explained how emergency laws imposed during Colombo's war against the LTTE were used to repress Tamil-speaking workers from the plantations. "Many plantation youth were arrested in Colombo during that time. Even if they were able to show their identity cards, they were still arrested. I think that dangerous situation is coming again and we have to oppose this law," he said.

When plantation workers took national strike action and protested for higher wages, management at the Alton Estate responded by sacking 38 workers. Police and management framed up 24 of these workers and two youth, on bogus charges of violence.

The sackings and frame-ups are part of ongoing witch hunts against militant workers by management and police in collaboration the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the main plantation trade union. The plantation action committees, under the political initiative and guidance of the SEP, are leading the struggle to protect plantation workers from these attacks.

We publish below comments by workers from other sectors about the SEP's campaign against the state of emergency laws by workers and youth from other sectors.

A Kandy hospital worker spoke about the divisive role of the trade unions which are covering up the dangerous implication of the government's emergency measures.

"The trade unions are not ready to organise a widespread struggle of the working class against the emergency rule and essential service orders [banning strikes in the public sector]. They don't even want to let workers know about these brutal laws," he said.

The hospital worker explained that he only found out about the state of emergency through the SEP-led Health Workers Action Committee. He said his father had worked at the Building Materials Corporation but was sacked under emergency rule during the 1980 July general strike. None of the unions, he added, fought the victimisations.

A teacher from Chilaw in the Northwestern Province said: "Various repressive measures can already be unleashed under emergency rule. That's signalled in the threats by Minister Weerasekara that the government will crush our struggle like they did to

the LTTE. All over the world, the ruling classes have no solutions for the issues confronting the people. Their only solution is to unleash repression."

Edwin Amarasinghe, a clerk, said that the government already had laws to lower the price of essential goods. "Prices are skyrocketing on a daily basis, but the real reason for emergency rule is to ban popular demonstrations and strikes, arrest and sack workers, and to censor freedom of writing and speech," he said.

The police have the power to detain and question anyone for more than 24 hours and were already suppressing protests. "The police recently intervened to stop a demonstration by self-employed people outside the Fort Railway Station [under the pretext of coronavirus quarantine laws]. Nothing like this was done when the liquor bars were opened," Amarasinghe said.

Rajapakse has proclaimed emergency rule because he fears the developing class struggles will become a broader movement against the government, he added.

"People are suffering from the impact of the pandemic on the one hand and wage cuts and price hiking. They cannot live. This will bring them onto the street and general strikes may emerge," Amarasinghe said.

A three-wheeler driver in Colombo said life had become extremely difficult for his family and that he would participate in the SEP's online meeting. The pandemic quarantine regulations meant he had no income and he had not received any government support, he explained.

"My wife works at a tea factory and we live a hand-to-mouth existence with that income. The workers are highly exploited in these small factories and some people in this area on some days do not have any income. The government fears that the people in the slums will begin demonstrating. The emergency laws are being imposed to suppress these protests," he said.



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