

Sri Lankan union leader joins right-wing campaign against vaccinations

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Ceylon Mercantile Industrial and General Workers Union (CMU) General Secretary Sylvester Jayakody is conducting a right-wing campaign against COVID-19 vaccinations, while insisting that the pandemic and resulting deaths should not be taken seriously.

Jayakody's unscientific and reactionary positions are outlined in a letter to Sri Lanka's labour minister, Nimal Siripala de Silva, and were published by *Wadabima*, a Sinhala-language website, on November 6.

The letter was in response to the minister supporting a Joint Apparel Association Forum (JAAF) official during a discussion about vaccine mandates in a meeting of the National Labor Advisory Council (NLAC) in late October. The NLAC is a tripartite corporatist body involving employer, government and trade union chiefs.

According to Jayakody's letter, Johan Lawrence, a former JAAF president, asked whether employers could block garment workers who refuse to be vaccinated from entering plants and that they be "confined to their homes without being paid." The labour minister fully agreed, declaring, "[O]f course, you can."

Jayakody's letter, which was the result of a subsequent meeting with 52 CMU branch leaders across 18 different companies, declared that mandating vaccinations was "a violation of the human rights of citizens as well as the fundamental rights guaranteed by our constitution."

That the Sri Lanka labour minister and a JAAF official agree that workers should be penalised if they refused to be vaccinated has nothing to do with protecting garment workers—or any other section of the working class—from COVID-19. In line with ruling regimes and the capitalist class in every country, the vaccination policy is to ensure that production is maintained and profits maximised.

From the outset, the Sri Lankan government and big business has pursued the policy of "herd immunity," prioritising profits before human lives. The Rajapakse government, after a brief, poorly prepared, month-long

lockdown in March 2020 began reopening the economy in mid-April in response to big-business demands and the impact on profits.

Hundreds of thousands of employees in garment and other manufacturing industries were ordered back to work without the provision of adequate health and safety measures. Within weeks many free trade zones (FTZ) workers and others were infected with the deadly virus and some died. In fact, the garment factories, which employ thousands in each facility, became a hot-bed of coronavirus infections.

In the past 18 months employers have eliminated thousands of jobs, cut wages, and extended working hours but not paid overtime, all with the agreement of the unions, including the CMU.

Jayakody's letter is not directed against employers or the government's criminal response to the pandemic. While falsely claiming that compulsory vaccinations violate "personal freedom," the CMU chief insists that "pharmaceutical companies and other interested parties have exaggerated the pandemic."

Jayakody's letter also ludicrously states that Sri Lankan deaths from COVID-19 are negligible. Only six workers have died, he claims, because they had "various complications." The media has "exaggerated the pandemic," he wrote, adding that rural workers should not be forced to "accept western medical science" because it is causing "mental instability."

In a previous October 19 online meeting, the CMU leader callously declared: "Even though a few have been died from COVID-19, we do not consider it to be a horrible deadly pandemic." This was the union's position, he added.

This brutal indifference to workers' lives point to the vast gap between the privileged layers that run the unions and the sentiments of the Sri Lankan masses who overwhelmingly support coronavirus vaccines and have

consistently demanded that health authorities provide them. Around 62 percent of the population is currently vaccinated.

Jayakody's claim that making vaccination compulsory is "a violation of human rights" and "constitutional rights," is completely false. No one has "the right" to infect others by refusing to take all precautionary measures, including vaccination.

The CMU leader is also attempting to spread scepticism about vaccines, insisting that they are unreliable and that pharmaceutical companies have not guaranteed their efficacy. None of these spurious and unscientific claims has been substantiated.

The rapid discovery and development of coronavirus vaccines is a welcome development and made possible because of the initial research of scientists in China, the US and Europe. This was facilitated by extraordinary advances in science and technology in recent decades.

The unrestrained drive for profit by giant corporations such as Pfizer, Moderna, BioNTech, and conflicting interests of rival companies and the advanced capitalist countries, are the main barriers to the rapid, free and equal distribution of vaccines around the world. This, however, does not invalidate the importance of vaccines but poses the necessity for the abolition of the private profit system and for the nationalisation of giant pharmaceutical companies and every major industrial sector under democratic control of working class.

Jayakody's claims that the number of coronavirus deaths is negligible and the impact of the virus is "exaggerated" are callous and sinister.

According to Sri Lanka's grossly underestimated official figures, over 560,000 people have been infected and more than 14,200 have died from the disease. The real numbers, however, are hidden by employers and government authorities, with union support, because they would fuel opposition to the criminal "opening up" policy.

Currently, the official global coronavirus death toll is over five million, with some studies estimating the real number of deaths to be as high as 17 million. In neighbouring India, the official death toll in July was over 400,000 but other studies estimated it to be 4.9 million. These infections and deaths are a direct result of the profit first, production at any cost policies of the government and corporate elites.

Jayakody's bogus claims that vaccine mandates violate basic "human" and "constitutional rights" are part of global right-wing campaign against vaccines and a

scientific response to the pandemic.

Jayakody and the CMU bureaucracy are notorious collaborators in the government's attacks on the working class and its profits before lives policies.

In April 2020, the CMU and other unions wrote to President Rajapakse pledging their backing for calls to end the coronavirus lockdown, declaring, "We do accept factories have to be re-opened to support the economy in its efforts to sustain the nation."

That Jayakody, the CMU and other Sri Lankan unions are coming out against vaccination is no surprise but in line with their commitment to the government's big business policies and the capitalist profit system as whole.

COVID-19 is a global catastrophe that has seen new and ever-more deadly and infectious variants emerge. It can only be fought through the independent action of the international working class and on the basis of the most advanced scientific knowledge and a socialist program. As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained in its "Oppose the right-wing campaign against vaccination!" editorial board statement on 29 July 2021:

"The policy of the working class must combine political intransigence and patient explanation. The development of a class-conscious labor movement, through the organization of rank-and-file safety committees in every workplace, would enable workers, particularly those in health care, to become advocates in a political campaign to require vaccination and protect their class from the deadly danger of the pandemic.

"The fight against the pandemic is not simply a medical issue. It requires a political struggle of the working class against the capitalist system. The response to the pandemic in the interests of public health requires a global plan and global coordination, which is possible only through the building of an international revolutionary leadership and the taking of power by the working class."



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