

COVID-19 infects Sri Lankan schools: Stop sacrificing the lives of students and teachers!

Teacher-Student-Parent Safety Committee
30 November 2021

The Rajapakse government's order for schools to begin reopening on October 21 has led to the infection of thousands of teachers and students with COVID-19 across Sri Lanka. Dozens of cases have also been reported in other educational institutions, including universities.

More than 4 million school children and about 300,000 teachers in public and private schools are in danger of becoming victims of the highly-infectious and deadly virus.

- According to Ceylon Teachers Union, which fully backed the school reopenings, more than 1,000 students and 100 teachers have been infected in schools around the country. Over 200 students from the North-Central Province alone have tested positive with the virus.

- The Southern Provincial director of education reported on November 15 that 148 students and 78 teachers had been infected in that province.

- A Kotawehera primary school in the Kurunegala district has been closed by authorities after three teachers tested positive for COVID-19 and parents were reluctant to send their children to the facility. Eight teachers have also been infected at the Maliyadewa girls' school in the same district.

- Students and teachers have been infected at several schools in the Badulla district.

- A Kilinochchi district epidemiologist from the war-ravaged north has revealed that over 100 students were among 1,500 people infected from the region in the two months up to November 26.

Like other official pandemic data, these numbers are gross underestimates. Government health authorities, moreover, are not compiling reports about the rising numbers of infections in schools.

The total number of officially recorded COVID-19 cases in Sri Lanka since early last year is now more than 563,000 with over 14,300 deaths. Since the beginning of this month the daily number of COVID-related deaths has

climbed to between 20 and 30, an indication of a new surge across the country. Many coronavirus infections and deaths, however, are not reported because of low testing rates and because many with symptoms are ordered to stay at home.

The Teacher-Student-Parent Safety Committee (TSPSC) states that these figures make clear that keeping schools open is accelerating the spread of deadly virus, placing the health and lives of students and teachers, and their families, in grave danger.

Reactionary and unscientific claims being peddled by supporters of "herd immunity" that children are not harmed by the pandemic, are false. These myths have been shattered by the rising numbers of infections and deaths among children globally and in Sri Lanka. By October, the number of Sri Lankan children infected with the virus since early 2020 had climbed to 59,000 with 67 deaths.

Colombo Lady Ridgeway Children's Hospital pediatric intensive care unit specialist Nalin Kitulwatte revealed last month that multiple organ inflammation, a disease that deactivates organs like the heart and kidneys through antibodies produced against the virus, was spreading among children infected with COVID-19 and that the hospital was overwhelmed.

On November 18, Dr Deepal Perera, from the same hospital, declared that the schools should be closed because of the rising numbers of infected children being admitted to the facility.

Ignoring these reports, Mass Media Minister Dullas Alahapperuma cynically told parliament on November 19 that closing schools "goes against the rights and future of children."

The government rushed to reopen the schools last month, not out concern for children's education or for their future. Colombo brutally slashed education expenditure this year to 126 billion rupees, down from

166 billion rupees in 2019. Next year it will be cut by another 6 billion rupees.

Authorities also failed to provide adequate online facilities for students, when schools were closed, depriving education to around 40 percent of Sri Lanka's students.

The Rajapakse government, like its international counterparts, is ruthlessly imposing its "new normal" or "living with the virus" policies to fully reopen the economy, with all workplaces, offices, markets and public transport operating without restrictions.

Sri Lanka Medical Association chairperson Dr. Padma Gunaratne has once again warned that "virus infections have increased in the places where public gatherings are higher" and called for such gatherings to be "minimised." Her warnings have been ignored by the government.

The criminal prioritising of profits before lives by governments around the world has resulted in the loss of 5 million lives and the infection of more than 250 million people. Some studies estimate the real number of deaths to be 17 million.

This month, the American Academy of Pediatrics noted that the total number of child COVID infections had climbed to 100,000 and 625 children had died from the virus. In Europe, including Britain and Germany, the situation has worsened.

These disastrous figures are a warning to Sri Lankan workers and the poor. The latest figures from across the island make clear that schools have become virus transmission centres. Many schools have not even been provided with basic safety equipment and practices.

The government and health authorities, as well as the Government Medical Officers Association which backs the ruling party, have urged parents and teachers to instruct children on how to "live with the virus."

Likewise, the Sri Lankan trade unions fully backed the school reopenings. The teachers' and principals' union alliance, which includes the Ceylon Teachers Union and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna-controlled Ceylon Teacher Service Union, uncritically supported the reopenings and shut down the 100-day teachers online strike for a living wage.

The constant and unscientific mantra from the government—that the "only solution for the virus is vaccination"—has been exposed by international developments. The reopening of factories and schools, even in countries where a high percentage of the population has been vaccinated, has seen new coronavirus outbreaks and continuing deaths.

In order to save the lives of children, the TSPSC advances the following demands:

- Close all schools and provide computer and high-speed internet facilities free of charge to all students and teachers until the pandemic is brought under control!
- Close all non-essential production while providing workers and the masses with wages, allowances and other basic needs!
- Billions of rupees must be allocated to increase COVID-19 testing, establish proper quarantining and treatment facilities and overhaul and properly staff the grossly underfunded health system!
- The immediate provision of free vaccines for all!

The only solution of the escalating crisis is for the international working class to fight for the elimination of the pandemic through a scientific globally-coordinated program. There is no national solution. The elimination of COVID-19 is not just a medical issue but requires a unified and independent political struggle by the international working class against the capitalist system which is responsible for perpetuating the COVID-19 and its deadly variants.

While there is widespread opposition among parents against school reopenings, the trade unions are hostile to any independent political struggle of the working class against the capitalist ruling elite.

Powerful working-class struggles have erupted in Sri Lanka and around world against government attempts to impose the burden of the economic crisis on the working class.

The Socialist Equality Party and TSPSC are fighting to take forward these struggles by building rank-and-file committees independent of the unions, and as part of the program advanced by the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

The committees will pave way for the unification with other workers in Sri Lanka and internationally on the basis of a socialist program.

We call on teachers, students and parents to join us in this fight to establish a TSPSC in your school, workplace and neighbourhood.



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