

Sri Lankan government eases COVID-19 restrictions ignoring scientists' warnings about Omicron

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
5 December 2021

Sri Lankan health authorities further relaxed limited health measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic amid the warnings of scientists internationally including in Sri Lanka about the dangers of latest Omicron variant that has already entered many countries. On Friday, the first Omicron infection was identified in Sri Lanka.

President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's silence about the continuing pandemic and the removal of restrictions is an expression of his government's criminal policy forcing people to "live with the virus" that is being pursued by all capitalist countries.

The working class must oppose the murderous policy of the government and the entire ruling class, which has let the coronavirus run rampant, taking the lives of tens of thousands and infecting hundreds of thousands.

The latest announcement by the Director General of Health Services, Asela Gunawardena, allows greater numbers at weddings and other functions and more customers in restaurants. The government kept open the country's main industrial and commercial centres since mid-April last year.

The only strict restriction extended this time also is the ban on public gatherings—including protests and public meetings—two weeks ago. This guideline was issued particularly targeting workers' and farmers' protests and demonstrations demanding higher wages, improved conditions, subsidized fertiliser, now a daily occurrence in Sri Lanka.

However, Sri Lankan independent medical experts have taken a different stand on the continuing pandemic and the emergence of a new variant.

Executive Director of the Institute for Health Policy (IHP), Dr. Ravi Rannan-Eliya, last week warned in an interview to the *Island* that the Omicron variant was bad news globally and "very definitely for us in Sri Lanka" because "based on how our medical establishment and government authorities think, we will be slow or refuse to put the necessary border controls in to prevent this entering".

As "the world is following the misguided strategy of just accepting the virus," countries such as the US, the UK and Sri Lanka, he claimed "the virus has plenty of chances to keep on

mutating more because the truth is more of the virus is circulating than ever before."

In a media briefing, Sri Lanka Medical Association President Padma Gunaratne has also warned that the "new variant has very high transmissibility and the possibility of evading vaccinations" and urged precautionary measures.

The government authorities have eased restrictions even as the country is recording increased numbers of infections and deaths in recent weeks prompting medical experts to sound the alarm about a new surge.

According to official statistics, the number of deaths in October was 543 and rose slightly to 552 in November. The number of new daily cases, which dropped to around 500 in late October, has now risen to nearly 800.

These are grossly underestimated figures, because the government is deliberately not carrying out systematic testing, tracing and treatment.

Despite the fact that the pandemic is surging in the US and Europe, governments are failing to take the necessary measures to guard against the Omicron strain. In India, where the official death toll is 470,000 deaths, the government has simply called for travellers from Omicron-affected countries to be tested.

Likewise, the Sri Lankan government has halted travel from several African countries but continued to end the few remaining internal restrictions. No matter how great the danger, it is determined to reopen the economy, as its track record demonstrates.

At the outset Rajapakse refused to impose the necessary public health restrictions saying "we were able to manage." However, on March 20 last year, he was forced to declare a lockdown as the government faced mass public anxiety about the global pandemic. Four weeks later, heeding the call of big business and following behind the US and European countries, Rajapakse began reopening.

Touting the "new normal," the government only imposed limited restrictions as major new surges occurred. He reluctantly locked down the country for six weeks from August 21 this year, as the highly infectious and deadly Delta variant emerged in Sri Lanka, infecting thousands daily and taking the

daily death toll to nearly 200.

From October 1, the Sri Lankan authorities began removing restrictions. The final major step was the reopening of schools from October 21, which was completed on November 22. In unsafe conditions, about 4.5 million students and 300,000 teachers have been ordered back into schools.

Teachers' unions, including the Ceylon Teachers Union and Ceylon Teacher Services Union ended a 100 days long online learning strike, betrayed the demand of teachers for higher wages, and supported the reopening of schools.

At least 1,000 students and 200 teachers have been infected by the end of November.

The government policy has prioritized profits over human lives. Presenting the 2022 budget, Finance Minister Basil Rajapakse falsely claimed that there had been an "early control of the COVID-19 pandemic" and boasted: "Normalcy has returned to the lives of our people. This has led the entire country to turn itself into a busy workplace."

The result has been huge profits for big business companies while poverty deepened for workers and the rural masses.

According to the *DailyFT*, the combined profits of Sri Lanka's listed companies reached an all-time high of 110 billion rupees in the third quarter. For the first nine months of the year they earned 292 billion rupees, "surpassing all historical full year results" and are predicted to surpass 400 billion rupees for the whole year.

By contrast, the proportion of the population below the poverty line increased to 11.7 percent in 2020, up from 9.2 in 2019, according to a World Bank report. At least 500,000 more people were plunged into poverty last year alone.

The government is imposing the burden of the worsening economic crisis on working people by ending price controls on essential food items, slashing price subsidies for farmers, cutting the budget for essential services and accelerating privatisations.

Even as the virus continues to spread, the president's unscientific mantra, backed by the media and pro-government health officials, is that "vaccination is the only solution." He claims that 62 percent of the population have had two doses and boosters will be available.

The cash-strapped Rajapakse government is peddling vaccination as the answer only in order to justify the lack of much-needed spending on the public health system, which even before the pandemic was suffering from decades of neglect.

Spending on public health has been a pitiful 1.2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP). Now, amid the continuing pandemic, it is being wound back, not increased. For 2021, the government cut health expenditure by 28 billion rupees from 187 billion rupees in 2019. Next year a further 6 billion rupees will be slashed. According to the IMF policy tracker, Sri Lanka spent only 0.8 percent of GDP on combatting the pandemic—the lowest level in South Asia.

Like its counterparts around the world, the pro-business and

nationalist pandemic policies of the Rajapakse government have proven to be a disaster for the working class over the past two years. A global pandemic requires an internationally planned and coordinated solution which is impossible under capitalism.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* perspective entitled "Omicron variant exposes 'vaccine only' strategy to combat COVID-19" on December 1 explained:

"The Omicron variant makes clear that there is no viable strategy to stop the pandemic and save millions of more lives other than a strategy of global elimination and eradication. This requires and entails the combination of global vaccine production and distribution with the entire arsenal of public health measures: the closure of schools to in-person learning, the shutdown of non-essential production, mass testing and contact-tracing, and the safe isolation of infected individuals."

Sri Lankan working class, uniting with workers around the world, must take initiative in the political struggle against the disastrous policies of the Rajapakse government and the entire ruling elite.

The opposition parties including the Samagi Jana Balavegaya, United National Party, Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna and Tamil National Alliance, which have backed the government's criminal herd immunity and reopening policy, are silent about the continuing dangers of the pandemic.

The Sri Lankan trade unions have fully backed putting profits before lives and have collaborated with big business and the government regime to implement the reopening of the economy.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) urges workers to form action committees independent of trade unions in every workplace and neighbourhood to fight for the policy of eliminating and eradicating the pandemic and against the deepening attacks on living conditions.

The SEP appeals to workers, young people and intellectuals, including scientists and medical experts to support the WSWS-initiated Global Workers Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic which will expose the disastrous response of governments, corporations and the media to the pandemic.

The SEP is campaigning to develop this fight in Sri Lanka, India and throughout the South Asian region as a whole as a critical element of the struggle for socialist internationalism. We appeal for your support in this struggle.



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