

Sri Lankan port and free trade zone workers back global inquest into pandemic

Our correspondents
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Colombo Port and Katunayake Free Trade Zone workers last week voiced support for the Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic, initiated by the *World Socialist Web Site*. They also shared with our correspondents their bitter experiences over the past two years.

Colombo harbour employees are particularly concerned about the Sri Lanka Ports Authority's (SLPA) latest move to do away with limited COVID safety measures. When infections began spreading among port workers, the SLPA was initially forced to limit calling in employees to work and a batch system was introduced.

Authority officials attempted to do away with this system and call all workers in regularly from last week, but workers opposed this move and it was temporarily halted.

A worker in the Colombo harbour repair section said the workers' inquest was timely: "I read the WSWs statement on the day it was published. Immediately I registered online my willingness to participate in the inquest.

"Some health safety measures were taken here when the virus began to affect employees... Even then, a large number of workers were infected. On many occasions, workers were infected when they were travelling in public transport. As port work was declared an essential public service, workers were forced to work even when the country was locked down.

"Limited PCR (polymerase chain reaction) tests were stopped by January. Today, even if a worker is infected, he has to do a PCR test personally. Now, face masks are not properly provided.

"Only a section of harbour workers has been given the booster vaccination. More than 1,000 workers have been infected so far. Some of them have not been

completely cured. Some are even unable to work.

"Though this is the situation, management decided to call the entire workforce into service from December 6 on regular basis. This decision was cancelled due to the vehement opposition of the workers.

"Hearing that management was planning to implement this decision once again from December 13, workers petitioned through unions, noting that 'calling all workers to service at once was putting them into danger.' The concern of management, as well as the government, is to increase profits not protect lives.

"Under the profit-driven capitalist system, there are no solutions for the global pandemic. I agree with the WSWs that workers should organise independently on the basis of a socialist program."

A worker at the harbour's naval division commented: "The reopening of the economy is giving priority to profit. All the workers in the harbour were called on to work. This will pave the way for more infections.

"I agree that there is no solution for the pandemic under the capitalist system. The inquest initiated by the WSWs is very important. All information on the spread of the virus should be made public. I will try to obtain the statistics in the harbour."

Since last year, port workers, like other sections of the working class, have faced inadequate safety measures by the government and the SLPA. President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's government took no significant measures to overhaul the health system, which has been dilapidated for decades, and did not implement systematic tracing, testing and healthcare measures.

In November 2020, when dozens of port workers were infected, the attendance of workers sharply dropped. Rajapakse issued an extraordinary gazette notification proclaiming the port an essential public service. This repressive law bans industrial action and

makes non-attendance at work illegal. Violations of essential services regulations carry heavy punishments, including dismissal and jailing.

A Socialist Equality Party (SEP) statement condemned this draconian law, saying: “The Rajapakse government’s attack on democratic rights of the harbour workers is a warning to the entire working class and an escalation of its criminal efforts to force the workers to work even when the coronavirus pandemic is spreading throughout the entire island.”

The statement called on workers “to come forward to defend all the harbour workers” and force the government to “reverse the essential service order.”

Not one of the trade unions or opposition parties opposed this ruthless order.

Katunayake Free Trade Zone (KFTZ) workers denounced the government’s failure to control the pandemic.

A female worker from a village in the Puttalam District, who had been working at a Smart Shirt factory in the KFTZ for about six years, explained that its employees had been vaccinated with two doses in July, but conditions remained unsafe. The coronavirus had not stopped anywhere and new variants were emerging.

“Initially random tests were done from time to time but now that does not seem to be continued. Only when infections are found, others in the vicinity are subjected to PCR tests and infected people are referred to quarantine.”

Free trade zone factories had not maintained social distancing. As the disease spread, certain precautions were taken but later abandoned. “Although the government insists people should take precautions, how could that be done? Workers travel in congested buses and cannot maintain social distancing.”

She recalled how workers suffered at the Brandix garment factory in Minuwangoda. Brandix is huge conglomerate employing more than 40,000 workers in Sri Lanka. Hundreds were infected at the factory but management forced workers to continue working until the infections were exposed and mass outrage erupted.

“The government says vaccination is the solution,” she said, but vaccinated workers had been infected for the second time. “The disease needs to be eliminated from the world, but they [the governments] have not taken any action. All governments are responsible for this devastation.”

Although she had worked in the factory for about five years, her monthly basic salary was less than 22,000 rupees (\$US110) and the maximum salary was about 50,000 rupees.

“We are working hard, not even having time to drink water,” she explained. “Employees are having a hard time these days. The management makes us exhausted.”

A United Tobacco Process factory worker said the virus, which emerged two years ago, should have been fully suppressed from the outset. Governments and big business did not care about the public.

“Though information about the spread of the coronavirus in Sri Lanka is limited, it has not gone,” she said. “The media is not telling the truth. Even now, many people are dying, but that is still not revealed.”

About 800 employees at her factory were infected, including herself, and later her daughter was infected.

“No one is taking responsibility for the virus. It is not the people who should be held accountable, but the authorities who hold office... We must point the finger at those who said they would take care of us.”

We urge workers, youth and intellectuals to support and participate in the workers’ inquest. As the WSWS statement explained on November 21:

“Drawing upon the research of scientists, the knowledge of public health experts and the real-world experience of working people and students, the inquest will investigate and document the disastrous response of governments, corporations and the media to the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. It will seek to expose the political and economic forces and interests that drove the policies that allowed the uncontrolled transmission of the virus and its development into a catastrophic pandemic that has killed millions worldwide.”



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