

Sri Lankan health workers endorse the Global Workers Inquest into the COVID-19 pandemic

The Health Workers Action Committee (Sri Lanka)
28 December 2021

The following statement was unanimously endorsed by a December 15 meeting of the Health Workers Action Committee in Sri Lanka.

The Health Workers Action Committee (HWAC) welcomes the Global Workers Inquest and pledges full support to make it a success.

Because governments in country after country are engaged in a policy of “living with the virus,” this inquest, we believe, will expose this murderous policy and solidarise the global working class against it. The successful zero COVID-19 policy in China further confirms the criminality of these governments.

As frontline health workers we have been battling the pandemic in hospitals and experiencing how the government has been handling the pandemic in a criminal manner.

At the early stages of the pandemic—that is, from mid-March 2020—the government imposed a lockdown for just a few weeks, until the last week of April 2020. There was no effective lockdown of the country, despite an upsurge of the pandemic from October 2020 until August this year.

In August, the government was forced to impose a second lockdown, after the deadly Delta variant began rampaging through the country. It led to patients overflowing at hospitals, with over 200 deaths per day and more than 5,000 infections per day, even with low numbers of PCR (polymerase chain reaction) tests.

While Sri Lankan experts recommended a minimum of 40,000 PCR tests per day, the government has only been carrying out between 5,000 and 20,000 tests. Factories and most workplaces continued working which led to COVID-19 infections reaching their highest level in the last weeks of August.

On July 5, 2021, the HWAC issued a statement which explained the worsening situation: “Instead of shutting down all non-essential workplaces, in parallel with a rapid vaccination program and massively increasing the number of infection detection tests, the scientific method of eradicating the pandemic, the government has allowed the profiteering of big businesses to continue. Large businesses, including all factories, are operating, and the so-called travel restrictions have been lifted, despite expert advice.

“Due to the rapid spread of the pandemic, there has been a sharp increase of patients in hospitals dedicated to COVID-19, as well as other hospitals. The record number of infected patients in the hospital system is at an unbearable level of 30,000. The spread of the more powerful Delta virus is reportedly exacerbating the situation.”

The government handling of the pandemic here in Sri Lanka is very similar to government responses around the world, including the US and in Europe. From the early days of the pandemic, the government adopted the murderous policy of “herd immunity,” allowing mass infections. The official undercounted number of pandemic deaths is now reaching 15,000 and infections are exceeding 570,000.

As health workers we have suffered a lot during the peaks of the pandemic. Health staff have had to work strenuously long shifts of up to 18 hours at a stretch. The government did not recruit any new hands with the outbreak of the pandemic, even though there were dire shortages of health staff in hospitals, so workloads increased immensely.

Nor did the government supply proper personal protective equipment (PPEs), forcing health workers to

improvise by using garbage bags and sewing together other things. Medically recommended face masks are rarely provided to us. We have also had to bear all the expenses for transport, isolation, and quarantining.

Mortuaries have overflowed, posing immense difficulties to health staff who have also suffered acute mental distress because of the large number of preventable deaths.

Hundreds of health employees and their families have been infected while at least 20 workers—from medical officers to ancillary workers—have died so far from the virus. On some occasions infected health workers were unable to find a bed inside hospitals during COVID-19 peaks.

Hospitals have also faced shortages of drugs, oxygen, and proper medical equipment to treat patients.

Successive Sri Lankan governments over decades have cut funding to public health infrastructure while boosting private healthcare. The upsurge of the pandemic, which has brought the dilapidated public hospital system to the brink of collapse, is an indictment of the entire ruling elite.

Patients have had to stay at home due to the non-availability of hospital beds. The intensive care unit (ICU) capacity of the public hospitals is about 500 beds and only a fraction of these can be used for COVID-19 patients. This has led to an increase in the number of pandemic deaths in normal wards and in homes.

As soon as Sinopharm and AstraZeneca became available, the government declared that vaccinations were the ultimate solution and began reducing health safety measures and directing all workplaces to operate at full capacity.

While health workers' rising anger against the government is expressed in frequent sporadic strikes and protests over our dire conditions, it has been difficult organising a collective struggle because of trade union pressure. The health sector unions divide us according to grades, and even within each grade, and there are several rival health unions. Getting together with the other sections of the working class has also been blocked by the unions.

The HWAC has issued several statements and campaigned among health workers to establish workers' action committees in hospitals, independent of the unions, to unite health workers across all grades and divisions.

“This year alone, the number of campaigns called by the health workers' unions exceeds 25. The unions that called these actions—separately or collectively—did not serve the interests of the workers but betrayed them, while serving needs of the government...

“We need to build action committees, independent of unions, in every workplace, which will enable us to reach out to other workers in struggle and our international class brothers and sisters.

“We advance a program that fights for reorganising production according to human need not for the profits of a few. This political program is based on the fight for international socialism.”

The government and pliant experts have responded to the Omicron variant by claiming that it only has mild symptoms. The dangerous and highly contagious nature of Omicron has been downplayed, health measures have been relaxed with schools and workplaces fully opened, along with public transport. With PCR tests now cut to around 5,000 per day, even though there are about 700 daily infections being reported, we expect to face a dire situation.

The HWAC condemns the government's criminal policies of “profit before lives.” As frontline health workers we take the brunt of these brutal policies and see firsthand that the working masses are the main victims.

We look forward to further involvement in the Global Workers Inquest and will provide information on the latest findings and experiences of HWAC members from Sri Lankan hospitals. We are determined to build up an international movement of working masses to eliminate and ultimately eradicate the virus as has been explained by the independent scientists who have participated in the webinars organised by the WSWS.



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