

Sri Lankan migrant workers support Global Inquest into COVID-19 Pandemic

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The Global Workers Inquest initiated by the *World Socialist Web Site* into SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, is attracting the support of workers, medical specialists, scientists and intellectuals in Sri Lanka and internationally.

The WSWS statement announcing the Inquest said: “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.”

Published below are interviews with Sri Lankan migrant workers employed in the Middle East. They explain some of the enormous difficulties they faced due to the criminal response of the ruling elite to the pandemic in both the Middle East and Sri Lanka.

According to the latest report by the World Labour Organisation, more than 200,000 workers annually migrate from Sri Lanka to Europe, the Middle East, North Korea, Japan and other countries seeking employment. There are currently more than two million Sri Lankan migrant workers.

Sunil, an experienced engineering mechanic, first began working at the Al Jubar Industrial Zone in Saudi Arabia in 2008. He voiced his backing for the Global Workers Inquest and said that he is fighting to win the support of his work colleagues.

Sunil previously worked at the Elastomeric company in Piliyandala in Sri Lanka. When the factory shut down, he sought foreign employment because his earnings in Sri Lanka were insufficient to pay for the education of his two sons and other familial commitments and because he wanted to build a house.

Explaining conditions at his new workplace in Saudi Arabia, Sunil said: “Newly-hired workers receive lower salaries than long-term employees but there are only a few

older workers in the company’s total workforce of 62. Workers’ wages, since the country reopened following a brief pandemic lockdown in 2020, are only 50,000–80,000 rupees (\$US246 - \$US394) per month, including overtime payments, but the amount of work has trebled since before the pandemic.

“In those days we worked nine hours, with two hours overtime, now we’re frequently working thirteen hours a day, and on Saturdays we have to work until 7 p.m. Overtime work is essential in order to receive enough income for a decent living. Factory owners, however, are more willing to get workers from Bangladesh and Nepal because they can be employed on low salaries.”

Management classifies fast workers as “clever,” he continued. “Those branded as ‘not clever’ are not given overtime. This is an attempt to speed up work by creating competition among the employees.”

Sunil said that if anyone is infected with COVID, the company owners regard it as the worker’s own mistake. Three months ago, when an Indian assistant production manager was infected, administration confined him to a separate room but did nothing to look after his health and fitness.

“He was dismissed from the job after he recovered and had to seek relief because he was already heavily indebted,” Sunil said, explaining that this meant employees would keep working even when they were ill.

“The only measures taken by the factory to prevent COVID-19 infections spreading was to provide Dettol sanitizer and face masks,” he added. It was not possible to practice physical distancing.

“If you are caught not wearing a face mask by a supervisor you are fined 5,000 rupees. But wearing a face mask while working for long periods on hot days is difficult and therefore many workers only wear face masks when the supervisors come around,” Sunil said.

Sachini worked as a housemaid in Kuwait but was

forced to return to Sri Lanka before completing her contract because she was unable to bear ongoing physical harassment by her employer. After leaving the house where she worked, she went to the police and offered them money to protect her. The Kuwait police took her money and then sent her to a detention camp in Talha.

The detainees, which include migrant workers without visas, she said, were treated inhumanely in these camps, held for months in crowded and unventilated rooms, only wearing the clothes they arrived with.

Sachini explained her experiences as a housemaid. “With the onset of the pandemic, our difficulties increased immensely. Many homes reduced their number of housemaids and salary payments are also delayed. I was the last servant in the house where I was employed and forced to do the work of two maids,” she said.

“The [detention] camps lack food, water and medicines and several people, including a woman from Sri Lanka, died because they were unable to bear the difficulties. We always appealed to the camp officers about our health but they only threatened us, calling us ‘heiwan,’ the Arabic word for animal. Ill patients were given only sleeping tablets and Panadol, a kind of paracetamol. When we are taken to these detention camps, [Sri Lankan] embassy officials intervene but they do not follow up anything,” Sachini said.

Asanka, a Sri Lankan worker employed in the Maldives tourist industry, said: “I work at a safari boat company which provides services to the tourists. In the vicinity of the Maldives, there are about 80 to 100 safari boats, employing 110 to 120 Sri Lankan workers.

“The tourists do not like employees wearing face masks and so management has instructed us to work without them. When the tourists enter the Maldives, they are not subjected to any COVID tests. They are only required to have had a test report 72 hours earlier from their own country. This means there is a high danger of us being exposed to the pandemic,” he said.

Asanka explained how his employer had tried to send workers back to their home countries without paying them salaries when the Maldives was previously closed because of the pandemic.

“Those who stayed only received half their salaries and some workers didn’t even receive that and could only survive with the support of fellow workers. I had just come back from being on leave in Sri Lanka when that happened and so, despite the difficulties, I had to remain in the Maldives.

“I helped others get back to Sri Lanka by appealing to

the Sri Lanka embassy in the Maldives. Lists of names were handed over to the embassy but only 60 people were able to go back. Others were forced to remain here until the end of 2020,” he said.

Asanka explained that many of those who returned to Sri Lanka faced a lot of difficulties. Those who agreed to quarantine under army control were sent to faraway camps.

“Large numbers of people were being detained in quarantine rooms which meant that people could be infected with the virus and forced to spend more than two weeks there. Many people spent about a month there and for those who had agreed to personally pay for the quarantine it cost a large amount of money. Many went back home penniless. Considering this, it was like being punished by the government,” he said.

In their initial discussions with WSWS reporters most of these migrant workers saw no alternative to the “live with virus” mantras of the government and the media. But after reporters explained that the pandemic could be eradicated and cited the zero-COVID policy pursued in China, they were optimistic about its global elimination and the Global Inquest.

Asanka said: “If other countries took measures like mandatory face masks and social distancing, closure of non-essential service stations, establishing quarantine centres and health service facilities as China did, then the pandemic would have been stopped a long time ago.

“The problem is, as you explain, that is not happening under the capitalist system, which gives priority to profits over human lives. This is why workers all over the world must fight for socialism and why the Global Inquest, which will provide this knowledge, is highly important.”



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