

Sharp price rises in essentials and shortages drastically hitting Sri Lankan workers and the poor

Our reporters
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Inflation continues to soar in Sri Lanka driving the price of food, fuel, cooking gas, medicine and other essentials to intolerable levels amid serious shortages. This is dramatically impacting on millions of workers, youth, small farmers and the poor, fuelling ongoing anti-government protests and demonstrations demanding President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government resign.

In April, the country's annualised inflation rate rose to nearly 30 percent, up from 18.7 percent in March, with food inflation at 46.6 percent compared 30.2 percent in March. The prices of essential food items, including rice and vegetables, as well as fuel and cooking gas prices, have massively increased.

A kilo of rice, for example has climbed from 95–120 rupees (about 35 US cents) in January last year to 200–240 rupees last month. Dhal (lentils) has risen from 168 rupees to 500 rupees and wheat flour from 65–70 rupees to 200 rupees between October and April.

A 450-gram loaf of bread went from 60 rupees in January to 140 rupees between January and March while a kilo of chicken rose from 750 rupees to 1,100 rupees over the same period. A kilo packet of milk powder has gone from 1,345 rupees in January to 1,945 rupees in April. The cost of pharmaceuticals increased by 29 percent in March and then 40 percent in April. There are grave shortages of critical medicines.

In April, the privately-owned Litro Gas Lanka Limited company suddenly announced that it was lifting the cost of a 12.5 kg cylinder of cooking gas to 4,860 rupees, up from 2,675 rupees, while a state-owned company increased it to 4,199 rupees.

These increases have forced many people to abandon cooking gas and shift to firewood as an alternative.

Others have attempted to use kerosene cookers, but this is also difficult because of shortages of kerosene fuel.

Petrol and diesel per litre prices have also dramatically increased, forcing up the cost of bus fares and heavily impacting on travelling costs for ordinary people.

Workers from a range of industries spoke to WSWs reporters about the poverty they now face and voiced their anger against President Rajapakse and his big business government.

A garment worker from the Next plant in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone bitterly denounced the Rajapakse government over the perilous situation facing millions of people across the island. “The people have become desperate and helpless and cannot make ends,” he said.

“Previously I had to spend about 50,000 rupees a month but now I need at least 70,000 to 80,000 rupees. Look how much a litre of petrol costs. The people are suffering while the rich live happily. The government must go home,” he said, adding that all 225 members of parliament should be forced to resign.

“We received a meagre 2,750-rupee increase in January, but the amount of overtime remains the same at just 60 hours per month. My salary last month was 40,000 rupees. My wife is also at home after giving birth to a child and she has been granted three months maternity leave. She only gets a basic salary some 25,000 rupees,” he said.

The Free Trade Zone and General Services Employees Trade Union, which covers workers at his factory, and all other unions, he said, were “completely silent” about workers’ problems.

Nishanthan, a small fisherman from Karainagar in

Jaffna, said he had been forced to leave his job and work as a mason because the cost of fishing equipment was unaffordable.

“There are six members in my family so it’s very difficult to live with the price of everything skyrocketing. I need to earn 3,500 rupees per day, just for family expenses but this is now very difficult because of the increasing cost of cement,” he explained.

One kilo of rice is 290 rupees today but I’m not sure what it will cost tomorrow. Food shortages are really hitting my family. We have to spend 400 rupees on bread just for one meal and I have twin babies who need Pedia-Pro milk powder but a packet of that is not enough to feed them for a week.

“My wife works as a health assistant at the Jaffna teaching hospital and has to travel 60 km every day by motor bike. This costs over 700 rupees in fuel each day. Her basic salary is just 24,000 rupees, which is not enough and so she has to do more overtime,” he said.

Salitha Wickramabahu, a repair worker at the Colombo Harbour, said the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war had pushed up the price of essentials.

“While the government has put this burden on the people, the capitalists have used this to increase their profits,” he said.

The trade unions, he continued, have “betrayed every struggle but workers have been forced to fight because the cost of living is unbearable. The opposition parties, including the Samagi Jana Balawegaya and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, are trying to disorient workers by hiding the crisis of capitalism.”

Hashan, an electricity board worker in Kandy, said: “I only get about 60,000 rupees per month but cannot pay my monthly expenses with this amount. I have to support my father, mother and younger brother. I send them 25,000 rupees per month but it is not enough.

“My father is a welder but cannot do his job because the price of iron has gone up. The people are facing a very bad situation under this Rajapakse government but it is not just Gotabhaya but the whole capitalist class that must be chased away,” he said.

Y. Mary, a 39-year-old worker at Glenugie Estate in Upcot, said she had four children and a total of seven members in her family.

“Currently, the price of wheat flour is 250 rupees here, but we need one kilo flour and rice per day for our

family. That means we need 500 rupees to buy both. Management said that we would be paid 1,000 rupees per day but if we fail to meet their daily target, we’re only paid 40 rupees per kilo of tea leaves.

“We pluck between 16 to 18 kilos of tea leaves, which means our day’s wage is around 640 to 760 rupees. This is not enough as the prices of food are increasing day by day and it’s very hard to take care of our children on this. Two of them are going to school and so they need 80 rupees for travelling per day. How can we manage this? My husband and I have reduced our meals to assist our children.

“We had membership of two trade unions but they’re useless and so is the government. As you say we need people who are for the interests of working people,” she said.

P. Suntharraj from the same estate also commented: “The CWC [Ceylon Workers Congress] and the government said that we would be given 15 kilos of wheat flour at a concession price of 80 rupees a kilo. We’ve not got that concession and are buying it at 250 rupees per kilo. We cannot afford it.

“Even if opposition parties came to power or formed an ‘interim government’ they will not raise workers’ living standards. It will never happen,” he said.



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