

Sri Lankan government suspends doctor for revealing extreme levels of child malnutrition

Pani Wijesiriwardena

8 November 2022

The Sri Lankan government has suspended former Hambantota Regional Director of Health Dr Chamal Sanjeewa, charging him with “causing inconvenience to the government” by presenting “false” information to a media briefing about child malnutrition in Sri Lanka. The suspension was instituted through the Health Service Committee of the Public Service Commission (PSC) under the section 48/31/1/15 of Establishment Code (EC).

On September 21, Dr Sanjeewa, who is president of the Medical and Civil Rights Professional Association of Doctors (MCPA), presented the results of a survey carried out by a group of doctors, including himself, on child malnutrition in several Suriyawewa regions in the Hambantota District in the country’s south.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) condemns the witch hunt of Dr Sanjeewa and the blatant attack on his democratic right to free speech. It demands the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the suspension order and the bogus charges and his full reinstatement. The SEP does not support Dr Sanjeewa’s political views.

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, Dr Sanjeewa explained that he had told a September media briefing that 30 percent of children are suffering from severe malnutrition and 50 percent from mild malnutrition in the relevant regions surveyed. Some sections of the media, however, dropped his phrase “relevant regions” and headlined their reports, “80 percent are suffering from malnutrition in Hambantota district.”

“I have been charged on that media interpretation,” he told the WSWS and added: “We were able to reveal many facts related to health and nutrition of these children in our observations. Through our interviews we learnt that this situation had developed over the last

six months. I can say assuredly that our survey was carried out on an entirely scientific basis. It is my democratic right to reveal its results to people.”

Clearly nervous about the political impact of the survey’s conclusions presented by Dr Sanjeewa, the government sent a group of state officials to Suriyawewa on September 26. Hambantota District Secretary H. P. Sumanasekera, who headed the group, immediately declared that it was incorrect to state that 80 percent of children were suffering from malnutrition. He failed, however, to provide any correct figures.

In contrast to the bogus investigation presented by the government and its official henchmen, a number of scientifically-based surveys have been published pointing to the deepening poverty, malnutrition and unemployment in the country caused by the government’s austerity policies.

According to a recent survey by the University of Peradeniya’s Department of Economics and Statistics, 9 million people or 40 percent of the Sri Lankan population have fallen below the official poverty level.

The social crisis will only worsen as the government implements the drastic austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as the precondition for an emergency loan. These include the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs through privatisation of public sector institutions, savage expenditure cuts to health and education spending and a broadening of the current tax net. The food inflation has already passed the 100 percent mark.

Fearful of a resurgence of the mass protests and strikes that erupted in April, President Ranil Wickremesinghe is using his anti-democratic powers to suppress opposition. He has ordered the detention of several student activists under the repressive Prevention

of Terrorism Act (PTA) for daring to protest. The government has also banned industrial action, including strikes in the power, petroleum, ports and health sectors, under the essential service legislation.

When public sector employees, including health workers, criticised the government over its failure to take necessary measures to control COVID-19, the previous government of President Gotabaya Rajapakse responded by banning state employees from speaking to the media.

Dr Sanjeewa's victimisation is an extension of this censorship aimed at intimidating and silencing government critics.

Once again, the health trade unions—the Government Medical Officers Association, the Public Service United Nursing Association and Government Nursing Officers Association—have maintained a deathly silence over the government witch hunt of Dr Sanjeewa, ensuring further attacks on basic democratic rights.

When President Rajapakse forced employees to work in unsafe COVID-19 conditions, placing profits ahead of human lives, all the trade unions backed the policy.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on the working class, health workers in particular, to come to the defence of Dr Sanjeewa and demand his immediate reinstatement. The defence of basic democratic rights is completely bound up with a political fight against the austerity measures that will drive millions more into poverty and destitution.

Such a struggle cannot be waged through the capitalist opposition parties and trade unions which support the IMF demands. The SJB and JVP are simply putting themselves forward as better able to impose the deeply unpopular measures on working people.

We call on workers to establish their own action committees, democratically controlled by the working masses, independent of the trade unions. To defend the right of health workers to speak out, it is necessary to form action committees in every hospital and health facility.

In poverty stricken rural areas, action committees are needed to fight to end the soaring prices and scarcity of essential goods. It is a lie that there is no alternative but to implement the IMF's demands and that nothing can be done to address malnutrition and other social evils afflicting working people.

All the resources exist to end this misery but are in

the hands of the corporate elite. Nothing less than the complete reorganisation of society by the working class along socialist lines is needed. The SEP calls for the repudiation of all foreign debts, the rejection of the IMF's austerity program and for workers' democratic control over the production and distribution of all essential items and other resources critical for the lives of working people.

The SEP calls on workers, youth and professionals who want to fight for this perspective to contact us.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact