Sri Lankan government's "let it rip" policy produces COVID-19 surge

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On May 20, Sri Lanka reported its highest daily tally of COVID-19 infections and fatalities this year, 15 and 3 respectively. Though these under-reported official figures appear to be smaller than previous spikes, they foreshadow a new wave of the deadly virus. The government long ago abandoned all basic coronavirus safety measures, including face mask mandates, falsely claiming that COVID-19 was just like a normal dose of the flu.

The latest figures bring the total number of COVID-related deaths in Sri Lanka to 16,864, and the total number of officially recognised infections to 627,357, since the deadly disease hit the island in 2020.

According to Worldometer figures, Sri Lanka, from May 1 to 22, officially reported 23 COVID-related deaths, or an average of one person every day, with 195 cases or a daily average of nine cases. Given the fact that the country only carries out a very limited number of COVID-19 tests, the actual figures must be much higher.

Currently, there are no official daily COVID-19 updates in Sri Lanka. In fact, the "COVID-19 Situation Report" from the Health Ministry has not been updated since December 13, 2022.

The most recent Our World in Data figures on COVID testing in Sri Lanka was almost one year ago, on June 14, 2022. It shows a daily COVID testing rate of only 0.06—i.e., the number per thousand being tested per day. The country has never exceeded 1.18, on May 21, 2021, during the last peak of the pandemic.

Government health authorities are attempting to downplay the COVID situation on the island but the World Health Organization (WHO) places Sri Lanka at 80th, or in other words, in the top third of reported cases in its list of 231 countries affected since the pandemic started.

The *Daily Mirror* recently quoted a senior health official who said authorities were "monitoring the situation, as there's always possibilities of a spike in fresh cases." Attempting to minimise the situation, the official claimed: "Nonetheless, there is little change because a massive wave of people is immunised against the coronavirus through a successful vaccination drive."

The unnamed official, however, failed to mention that there is now clear evidence that the vaccines, including Moderna and Pfizer, offer immunity against COVID-19 for only six months. Mass vaccinations stopped last October, almost seven months ago. Although almost 15 million, or 67.6 percent of the population, were said to be fully vaccinated on October 23, 2022, the entire population is now susceptible to the highly immune-evasive and infectious Arcturus subvariant of Omicron XBB.1.16 now spreading across the globe.

Colombo continues to cover up the growing danger, while maintaining its criminal "let it rip" policies that place profits before human lives. Health authorities recently responded to a new surge in cases in northern Jaffna district by blocking the imposition of basic COVID-19 safety measures.

Apart from a short lockdown—from March to April 2020—when infections first hit the island, successive governments have abandoned even rudimentary COVID safety measures, with most people, including doctors and nurses in hospitals and other health settings, no longer wearing masks.

The ending of the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC), first declared by the WHO in January 2020, has also opened the way for capitalist governments everywhere, including in Sri Lanka, to abandon all previous limited COVID preventive measures.

WHO's announcement came despite 12,000 global excess deaths attributable to the pandemic per day, according to Our World in Data. This figure has spiked

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considerably since March with the Arcturus subvariant becoming dominant in India.

Hundreds, and in many instances, thousands of people in Sri Lanka, including school children, do not wear masks at religious gatherings, in hospitals and on crowded buses and trains, guaranteeing the rapid spread of the deadly disease.

Warnings by epidemiologists and serious medical scientists about the danger of even more virulent new variants of COVID-19 are being ignored by the Wickremesinghe government.

At the same time, successive governments, in line with the demands of the International Monetary Fund and international finance capital, have unleashed a budget-cutting onslaught against the public health sector, pushing it to the brink of collapse. Desperate shortages of essential medical equipment and life-saving pharmaceuticals are being reported from all over the island.

Like all other capitalist governments, the Wickremesinghe government—a regime of austerity, violence and anti-democratic repression—and the trade unions, which block a unified independent struggle of workers to fight these social attacks, are utterly indifferent to the plight of millions of its citizens.

Unwilling to provide even the most rudimentary health measures, other diseases, previously held at bay, are reemerging. The latest of these include a dangerous outbreak of dengue fever which has infected over 33,000 people so far this year. Malaria has also returned with the first malaria death in 14 years reported last month.

This worsening social catastrophe is yet another example of the historic crisis of the capitalist system. It must be replaced with a rational social system—socialism—which places human life, and the basic needs of the working class and the rural masses, above private profit. The struggle for this perspective can only be carried forward by an international movement of working class.

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