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Sri Lankan president “reopens economy” despite pandemic

On Monday, despite the worsening coronavirus pandemic, Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse announced the government was “reopening the economy,” including in the Colombo and Gampaha districts, which health authorities have identified as high-risk areas.

State institutions and big businesses have been opened, with up to one-third of the workforce called back to work. The government had already allowed major exporting businesses to resume production about two weeks ago.

Heavily-armed military personnel have been stationed in trains, stations and bus stands to monitor workers’ movements. According to police spokesman Deputy Inspector General Ajith Rohana, 10,000 officers have been deployed in the Western province. State intelligence and police officers in civilian clothing have also been deployed.



Soldiers checking a worker before he boards a train in Colombo

On April 20, President Rajapakse told the media he had instructed the secretary of defence, retired Major General Kamal Gunaratne, to prepare “wartime” measures in Colombo. On April 27, the government sent large numbers of soldiers to Colombo, where they have been stationed in 16 schools.

The pretext for these deployments is to ensure that the population adheres to “social distancing” and other healthcare guidelines. The real reason, however, is to suppress any resistance to the return to work while COVID-19 continues to spread.

In an indication of widespread opposition, many employees did not show up for work in Colombo and other cities on Monday. The government admitted that although they had arranged 47 trains only 10 were operated. About 2,800 people had reserved seats in advance but only 997 travelled. While 5,200 buses were ready in Colombo and other areas, only 3,200 operated, partly because drivers and conductors did not report for work and partly due to low passenger numbers.

In a statement on Monday, aimed at justifying the reopening of the economy, Rajapakse falsely claimed that “COVID-19 has now been brought under control to a satisfactory degree.”

In the same statement, the president said the government had to “maintain a balance between steps taken to prevent the spread of the disease on the one hand, and the restoration of normalcy on the other.”

The president made clear that Sri Lanka is following the lead of the imperialist countries, which have failed to control the pandemic and are reopening businesses at the risk of workers’ lives. “Even countries like Italy, Britain, France and the USA, which experienced tens of thousands of coronavirus-related deaths, have now commenced programs for the gradual restoration of normal life,” he said.

In recent weeks the number of infected in Sri Lanka has increased rapidly. Yesterday there were 889 cases, according to the President’s media division, up from 690 on May 1. Testing has deliberately been kept at a low level, so the real figures are undoubtedly higher.

Health authorities say they carried out just 36,000 tests during 52 days from March 18 to May 10. These figures are unreliable, however, as earlier, authorities reported 32,000 tests were done between February 18 and May 5.

The Rajapakse regime is ignoring the World Health Organization's (WHO) warning that the premature reopening of economies will greatly endanger human lives. On Monday, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus emphasized that before governments reopen businesses, "they must ask if the epidemic is under control, if the national health care infrastructure can cope with new resurgences, and if the public health surveillance measures in place are sufficiently robust to trace, isolate, treat and track at a community level across the nation."

Sri Lankan medical experts say that the PCR (Polymerase Chain Reaction) tests must be increased to at least 2,000-5,000 per day. They have warned that resuming normal work without controlling the virus creates the danger of a major outbreak.

The Rajapakse regime, however, is determined to revive the economy at the expense of workers' health, living standards, and lives.

The president's media statement noted that state and private sector employers have discretion to decide how many employees they call back. Big businesses have already cut jobs and wages, increased working hours beyond eight hours a day, and halted contributions to pension funds for six months.

Yesterday, Labour Minister Dinesh Gunawardena told the media that the trade unions had agreed that businesses could pay only half the monthly salary or 14,500 rupees (\$US75) for those who were not immediately recalled for work.

Workers' anger and resistance is growing. On Monday about 1,000 workers at Sumithra Garments in the southern town of Weeraketiya went on strike opposing a move to halve their wages.

At the Maradana railway hub in Colombo, in the locomotive section, only 15 workers had been called in on Monday. One worker told the WSWs that management had decided to call one third of the 180 workers for one week at a time on a rotating basis. Workers have to prepare their own meals. Overtime work, on which workers depend to boost their meagre monthly wage, has been cut.



Soldiers patrolling a train station in Colombo

The opposition parties—the United National Party (UNP), Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB) Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Tamil National Alliance (TNA)—support reopening the economy.

UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe said last week, “We are willing to help the government because this is not a time to play adversarial politics.”

On Monday last week the TNA leaders met with Rajapakse and made a similar pledge.

The entire corporate media also supports the back-to-work drive. *Divayina*, for instance, wrote yesterday that people should learn to live with the “invisible enemy,” since no treatment will be found for at least two years.

Several trade unions, including the Free Trade Zones and General Services Employees Union and Ceylon Mercantile Union, wrote to the president urging him to meet with them. “We do accept factories have to be reopened to support the economy in its efforts to sustain the nation,” they declared.

Last week these unions joined others controlled by the JVP in a meeting with the labour minister and employers, where they agreed to pay cuts for workers in exchange for companies delaying layoffs. However, companies have already begun cutting jobs.

None of the unions, which act as agents of the state and big business, raised the severe health risks posed by a premature return to work.

But why should workers be forced to risk their lives to maintain the profits of big business?

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls on workers to refuse to work until safe and healthy conditions can be guaranteed. All working class and poor families must be provided with an income to maintain a decent standard of living. Relief must be provided to small businesses, farmers and fishermen, whose earnings have collapsed.

The massive foreign debt must be repudiated instead of its burden being imposed on workers and the poor.

The realization of this program requires the abolition of the profit system and replacement of the Rajapakse government with a workers' and peasants' government, as part of the fight for international socialism.

Only the SEP, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of Fourth International (ICFI), fights for this program. We call on workers, young people and class-conscious intellectuals to join the SEP and build it as a mass revolutionary party of the working class.

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