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Amid surging pandemic, Sri Lankan government criminalizes strikes by public sector workers

Critical developments are taking place in the South Asian island-state of Sri Lanka that workers throughout the world must be aware of and actively oppose.

Over the past two weeks, Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapakse has issued two decrees that arbitrarily rewrite the country's laws to strip nearly one million public sector workers of the legal right to strike.

These workers now face draconian punishments, including mass firings and lengthy jail terms, if they strike against the government's homicidal response to the pandemic and its drive to intensify the exploitation of the working class and slash public services. The decrees also criminalize any individual or organization that advocates for strike action.



Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapakse, center. (AP Photo/Eranga Jayawardena)

The immediate target of the first decree, issued on May 27, was a threatened strike by 12,000 village government officers, who were demanding COVID-19 vaccinations, but it stripped hundreds of thousands of other public sector workers of their basic rights. The union representing village workers immediately called off the impending job action.

Five days later, on June 2, Rajapakse issued a second decree on the eve of a threatened walkout by workers at many major hospitals. It extended the ban on strikes to health care and other government workers.

The two decrees cover port, railway, bus transport, petroleum, gas, state bank and insurance workers; nurses, doctors and other health care workers; government administration workers, workers at state-owned food distribution companies; and employees of Sri Lanka's nine provincial councils.

Workers who defy the strike ban can be fired. They also face fines of between 2,000 and 5,000 rupees, "rigorous imprisonment" of two to five years, the seizure of their "movable and immoveable property" and the removal of their professional credentials.

Any individual who seeks to "incite, induce or encourage" someone subject to the strike ban to not attend work, whether through a "physical act or by any speech or writing," is likewise liable to fines, property seizures and jail terms of up to five years.

Without warning, let alone any public debate, basic democratic rights, including the rights to free speech and to strike that are guaranteed in Sri Lanka's constitution, have been abrogated with the stroke of a pen.

The first decree makes a brief mention of the pandemic, claiming that the government services and departments under the strike ban are "essential" in the "face of the COVID-19 pandemic." In reality, it is the government and the Sri Lankan ruling class that have sabotaged any science-based response to the pandemic by systemically prioritizing profit interests over saving lives.

Since April, the pandemic has surged across the island. The official death toll has more than doubled in just the past five weeks to 1,656. New infections, according to the

government's figures, are currently averaging more than 3,000 per day, a gross undercount. Yet the Rajapakse government, with the full support of the opposition parties, has insisted that the "economy" and especially major export industries, like the garment sector, tea and rubber plantations, must keep running.

Demands for personal protective equipment (PPE) and the vaccination of frontline workers have figured large in a growing wave of public sector workers struggles, which the government fears will intersect with mounting unrest among plantation and other private sector workers.

The Rajapakse government is also looking nervously across the Palk Strait at the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, where there have been numerous strikes and protests by Hyundai, Renault-Nissan and other autoworkers against the lack of COVID-19 protections amidst a catastrophic surge in the pandemic.

The Rajapakse government's herd immunity policy is the cutting edge of its drive to increase profit extraction from the working class, including through a further round of brutal IMF austerity measures.

It is all the more necessary to alert the international working class about these developments because the "opposition" parties, corporate media, trade unions and pseudo-left groups have all maintained a complicit silence on the decrees. Apart from a statement last Thursday from an alliance of postal, teacher and health care unions that expressed "regret" over the decrees, the arbitrary abrogation by presidential fiat of basic democratic rights has been completely ignored.

The government has not, as of yet, sought to deploy its new draconian powers against public sector workers. Fearful of sparking mass working class unrest, it has not initiated sanctions against more than 20,000 nurses, doctors, lab technicians and other health care workers who went ahead with a previously scheduled five-hour walkout last Thursday.

But a headlong confrontation between the Sri Lankan ruling class and its state apparatus, on the one hand, and the working class and oppressed rural toilers, on the other, is on the order of the day.

In preparation for a confrontation with the working class, Rajapakse has stacked the government apparatus with military officers who cut their teeth in the 30-year war against the island's Tamil minority; cultivated extreme right Sinhala-Buddhist organizations; and plotted to change the constitution to enhance the president's arbitrary powers. Recently, one of Rajapakse's ministers mused that the president should "become" more "like Hitler."

The developments in Sri Lanka are of vital importance to workers around the world. The dictatorial methods employed against Sri Lankan workers will be used against workers everywhere.

Everywhere, the ruling elites are determined to make workers pay for the crisis of global capitalism, enormously exacerbated by the pandemic. The catastrophic impact of the pandemic—more than 3.5 million dead worldwide—is the direct consequence of the decision of governments to prioritize corporate profits over lives. The bailout of the rich, moreover, is to be followed by the destruction of public services and increased exploitation.

But this class war program is encountering growing resistance, including from Volvo Truck workers in the US, Vale Inco miners in Canada, teachers and bus drivers in Brazil, autoworkers in India, and BHP copper miners in Chile. Resistance is increasingly breaking through the decades-long suppression of working class struggle by the corporatist trade unions and the establishment "left" parties.

In response, the ruling class is turning to authoritarian methods of rule, criminalizing social opposition and cultivating far-right forces. In Colombia, the US-backed Duque regime has unleashed murderous police violence against mass protests over tax increases, crushing poverty and ever-mounting social inequality. In Spain and France, there have been public coup threats from military officers.

In the US, the center of global capitalism, Trump, with the support of the Republican Party leadership and important sections of the military-security apparatus, attempted a coup in plain sight, culminating in the storming of the Capitol on January 6.

The Sri Lankan bourgeoisie is mired in debt, faces an increasingly rebellious working class, and is bitterly divided over its geopolitical orientation as South Asia has emerged as a central arena in the US offensive against China. Moreover, none of the issues that led to Sri Lanka's 30-year civil war have been resolved.

Changing what needs to be changed, every capitalist ruling elite faces similar intractable problems for which its response is intensified worker exploitation, reaction, militarism and war.

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges workers throughout the world to come to the defense of their class brothers and sisters in Sri Lanka. In the first instance this means making known far and wide the import and significance of Rajapakse's class war decrees, preparing solidarity action in support of any workers who are victimized, and intensifying the struggle to mobilize the interconnected social power of the international working class.

This requires building new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file workplace committees, independent of and in opposition to the corporatist trade unions. The development of the class struggle is demonstrating the objective unity of workers, irrespective of differences of nationality, ethnicity, race or gender. But this unity must be leavened by a conscious repudiation of all attempts to divide the working class.

In Sri Lanka the fight to unite Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim workers means opposing the state-sponsored "Sinhala first" policy, as well as the efforts of the Tamil bourgeoisie, who have emerged as the most vociferous proponents of Sri Lanka's subordination to Washington's war drive against China, to inculcate Tamil nationalism.

Toward this end, the International Committee of the Fourth International at its May Day online rally initiated the founding of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

The central problems that face the working class, from the pandemic and rampant social inequality to the danger of war and dictatorship, are global in character and can only be combated through the coordinated global action of the working class. As a crucial element in their preparations to politically confront the Rajapakse regime and the Sri Lankan bourgeoisie that stands behind it, workers in Sri Lanka must strive to unify and coordinate

their struggles with workers in India, the Middle East, Europe, North America and throughout the world.

The development of a powerful counteroffensive of the working class, rallying all sections of the oppressed behind it, is inseparable from the fight to build a revolutionary socialist leadership. Workers in all sectors and in all countries must be united in a common political offensive to take power, expropriate the ruling class and establish a socialist society based on social need, not private profit.

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