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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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13.06.2021

Sri Lankan unions maintain deathly silence over criminalisation of industrial action

Two weeks ago, on May 27, Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse used the Essential Public Services Act (EPSA) to ban industrial action in the port, petroleum, gas, railway and bus transport sectors, as well as district-level government administrative offices, state banks, insurance and customs-related services.

On June 2, he issued another decree adding the health service, state consumer goods distributions institutions and all government offices at nine Provincial Councils to the EPSA.



Nuwara Eliya hospital workers protest [Credit: K. Kishanthan]

Workers striking or taking any form of industrial action in these sectors face “rigorous imprisonment up to two to five years and a fine of 2,000 to 5,000 rupees or both” following a summary trial before a magistrate. Those found guilty will be blacklisted from any future employment and can have their movable and immovable property seized.

Anyone “inducing or inciting or encouraging” industrial action through “any physical act or by any speech or writing” will similarly be punished, an explicit assault on the constitutionally guaranteed rights to freedom of expression and speech. Rajapakse’s anti-democratic measure is not just a direct attack on the nearly one million employees that have been targeted, but a threat to the entire working class.

Despite the far-reaching character of this assault, not a single trade union has explained the gravity of these decrees to its members or demanded the immediate withdrawal of the measures, let alone called for union members to politically prepare to defend their rights. The deadly silence of virtually all Sri Lankan unions is tacit approval of these reactionary laws.

The Village Officers Union responded immediately to Rajapakse’s May 27 decree by cancelling a planned strike of its 12,000 members the following day. It said nothing about the government measures. Bureaucrats from a union front of teachers, postal workers and a section of the health service, issued a perfunctory statement voicing their “regret” over the bans.



Kandy Hospital workers demonstrate [WSWS Media]

The Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA), a pro-government union, sent a letter to Rajapakse raising its “concerns.” The industrial bans, it declared, “would lead to a crisis situation” and “opportunistic groups would use it [EPSA] for ulterior motivations.”

In other words, the union’s concern was not the repressive laws but the “crisis situation” facing the government when confronted by the eruption of mass working-class opposition.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its continuation over the past 18 months has intensified the crisis of global capitalism to an intensity not seen since World War II.

The Sri Lankan government and the ruling elite waited until March 20 last year before imposing any lockdown measures and then, in mid-April, ordered a reopening of the economy in response to big business demands. In line with his global counterparts, Rajapakse declared that the people had to live with the “new normal”—the criminal policy of “herd immunity” that prioritises profits over human lives.

The Sri Lankan unions fully supported last year’s reopening of factories and other institutions. An April 2020 letter sent to Rajapakse by six unions, including the Free Trade Zones and General Services Employees Union and the Ceylon Mercantile Employees Union, declared that the reopenings were necessary to “sustain the economy.” The letter appealed to the president to take advantage of the unions’ “experience” in how to run the factories.

Union officials then met with the labour minister and representatives of the National Labour Advisory Council (NLAC), discussing the difficulties facing employers and how wage and job cuts could be used to address these problems.

Last November, the Sri Lankan unions kept their mouths shut when Rajapakse imposed an essential services order on port workers, banning strikes and any other industrial action.

The unions’ response to the government’s latest essential services measures, marks a new stage in their collaboration with the government and employers. It is further proof that the unions are tools of big business and the capitalist state.

The official opposition parties have not uttered a word on Rajapakse’s measures.



Ampara health workers demand COVID-19 safety measures [Source: Facebook]

The Samagi Jana Balawegaya, the United National Party-led alliance, is urging the government to hold an “all-party conference” and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) is calling for a broad “mechanism” to deal with the pandemic. The Tamil National Alliance has called for health emergency laws because of the coronavirus crisis. Notwithstanding minor tactical differences, these parties are in a de-facto coalition with the government.

Likewise, the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party is silent about Rajapakse’s strike bans. Last month it wrote to the president, prime minister and the army commander heading the COVID-19 prevention task force, advising them that they needed a program to curb the pandemic.

President Rajapakse is determined that workers and the poor must pay for the escalating crisis of Sri Lankan capitalism. The government’s criminal policies have seen the daily death toll rise to about 100 deaths, with infections averaging 3,000, figures that are deliberately understated.

Despite the surge in COVID-19 infections over the past two months, Rajapakse last week ordered provincial governors and district administrative heads to make sure that factories and projects keep operating and not be immediately shut down “when an infected person is detected.”

Addressing a Ceylon Chamber of Commerce forum, Rajapakse declared last week: “The government of Sri Lanka is proactive and pro-business... We will look very favourably upon investment” and provide “policy stability.”

Rajapakse’s essential services strike ban is a clear message to international investors that his government will ruthlessly suppress the class struggles and defend their profits. It also constitutes another stage in his moves towards a presidential dictatorship.

Since coming to power Rajapakse has placed in-service and retired generals to key administrative posts. In April, he appointed armed forces officers as coordinators in the country’s 25 districts, placing soldiers on standby in the name of maintaining “law and order.”

Like the ruling classes in every country, the Rajapakse government and the capitalist class are terrified by the emerging class struggles challenging the devastating conditions produced by the pandemic.

Sri Lankan health workers continue to defy the government’s strike bans, taking action to demand health and safety measures, job security and improved allowances. On Wednesday, another section of health workers began holding lunch-hour protests. On the same day, daily-paid health workers demonstrated, and yesterday tens of thousands of health staff held a five-hour national walkout.

These protests are an indication of the rising social opposition among public sector workers and in the private sector workforce.

As the WSWS Perspective on June 7 noted: “The government has not, as of yet, sought to deploy its new draconian powers against public sector workers.... 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.”

As the Perspective explained, workers must politically prepare for a counter-offensive. This means opposing all attempts by the Sri Lankan ruling elite, the Rajapakse government and their racist allies to whip up anti-Muslim and anti-Tamil provocations to divide the working class. In order to go forward, workers must build rank-and-file workplace committees, independent of and in opposition to the trade unions.

The establishment of these committees provides the basis for workers—who face common problems and a common enemy—to unite across all industries and sectors in Sri Lanka and internationally. This is the basis of the International Committee of the Fourth International's April 23 call for the establishment of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees!

The Socialist Equality Party is the only organisation in Sri Lanka fighting to mobilise the working-class against the entire political establishment, and fighting for a workers' and peasants' government based on a socialist and internationalist program.

World Socialist 12.06.2021