

Union retreats amidst growing mass support to the Sri Lanka doctors' strike

Our correspondent
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After eighteen days of strikes by Sri Lankan doctors, Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) officials called off their action on July 1 after bowing to a demand by President Chandrika Kumaratunga.

The doctors' union called for talks with the President on June 25, after negotiations broke down with the Minister of Health, Nimal Siripala de Silva. The GMOA said they had no faith in the Health Minister and accused him of going back on his word. Doctors have been demanding the government scrap its plans to decentralize the health administration and turn its control over to the Provincial Councils (PC). The doctors have warned that this measure will destroy free health services for the masses.

The People's Alliance regime has argued that devolution of health services, already in progress under the 13th amendment of the constitution passed to accommodate the 1987 Indo-Sri Lanka Accord, could not be reversed without a change of the constitution, which requires a two-thirds majority in the parliament. The government, which holds power by only one vote, claimed it could not achieve this majority in the present parliament.

When prominent lawyers pointed out that this could be achieved by a parliamentary act passed with a simple majority, the government declared that it could not rely on the votes of the Tamil parties, since the establishment of PCs was supposedly to devolve power to the Tamil areas. But the fraud of this argument is revealed by the fact that there has been no PC for the two provinces that are predominantly Tamil-populated since the North-East PC was dissolved by the former UNP regime a decade ago. The PA regime has maintained this policy.

The PA regime's attempt to use an essential service

order against the strike did not bring the expected result. The use of thugs to attack the doctors and provocative propaganda, using state and private media establishments, to incite the masses against the strike also failed. Instead these methods helped increase mass sympathy towards the doctors' struggle and hardened the stand of the rank-and-file doctors.

Several doctors' houses were stoned and goons mobilized by the regime set fire to a doctor's car. A Muslim doctor working in Vavuniya, a war-torn northern border town, was also abducted. The regime attempted to blame the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for the abduction but the doctors' union rejected the allegation and threatened to withdraw the emergency services they were still performing at the hospitals, if the doctor was not safely returned.

On June 25 President Chandrika Kumaratunga banned all ministers and MPs from talking to the GMOA about a settlement. She rejected the GMOA's appeal for talks declaring that unless the doctors' union called off the strike prior to such a discussion she would not participate.

The Health Workers Action Committee, led by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), held a public meeting on June 26 to explain the critical issues involved in the strike and the political preparation needed to win the struggle. The meeting, attended by over 150 workers, including doctors, nurses and non-medical employees of the health services, was held in front of Ward 14 inside the Colombo National Hospital premises. The meeting was addressed by convener of the action committee and SEP member Ajitha Gunarathna, W. A. Sunil from the SEP Central Committee, and S. K. Keerthi, secretary of the Action Committee to Defend the Right to Housing.

Anxious over developing support for the doctors'

struggle, nurses' union leader and Buddhist reverend, Muruththettuwe Ananda, notorious for his betrayal of countless nurses struggles, convened a meeting of Sri Lankan union officials on June 27. Called under the guise of supporting the doctors' strike, the meeting was attended by the leadership of 25 unions and chaired by long-time opportunist Bala Tampoe. Union officials evaded all the central political issues posed by the strike.

When SEP representative, W. A. Sunil, explained the role of the PA regime in defending the constitution, which it had previously promised to scrap, and proposed a political program to defend the free health service and the democratic rights of all workers, the union bureaucrats listened silently in an attempt to ignore it all.

In the end union officials proposed writing to ask Kumaratunga, who is committed to implementing IMF austerity measures, to hold talks with the GMOA. They also decided to hold a protest picket in Colombo on July 1 to press for this. The SEP representative present differentiated himself from this capitulatory course and refused to sign the resolution.

In the meantime Ranil Wickramasinghe, UNP head and leader of the parliamentary opposition, instructed his MPs not to take political advantage of the PA regime by supporting the doctors' strike. He insisted that the UNP must do everything to organise a settlement. This consensus between the two main ruling class parties was due to the dangers posed if the doctors' strike continued and became a rallying point for other workers.

Kumaratunga eventually agreed to reverse her previous decision and meet with the doctors union after several ministers urged her to do so at a June 30 cabinet meeting. On July 1, the Presidential Secretariat notified the GMOA that Kumaratunga would meet with the doctors' union on July 2 on the condition that they resume work before the meeting.

On hearing of the offer union officials, in order to pressure the GMOA to attend the talks and halt the strike action, canceled the scheduled July 1 protest picket. The GMOA, which had previously rejected government demands for an end to the strike action as a condition for talks with Kumaratunga, reversed their position and resumed work at 2pm on July 1.

When a WSWS correspondent visited the GMOA

office on the afternoon of July 2 to interview union officials about their talks with the president, a jubilant mood prevailed. GMOA officials said Kumaratunga had agreed to appoint a committee of seven to probe into the problems, which would produce a report in a month.

While this was portrayed as a great victory by GMOA officials, the Sri Lankan people have lost count of how many committees, commissions and task forces have been appointed by the PA regime during their five year rule. While these bodies have met the government has intensified the attack on basic rights and social conditions. As for the promises of the president, only the incorrigibly naïve believe them now.

As GMOA leaders were explaining their achievements in the government talks President Kumaratunga was addressing a public meeting at Ragama, a nearby suburb of Colombo.

Kumaratunga, who outlined her intention to implement all IMF dictates, characterized her discussion with GMOA delegates as “speaking to the deaf”. She added: “Nowhere in the world do doctors strike for their demands, placing the patients at risk, other than in Sri Lanka. They even press me to defy the constitution.”

The only comment made by one of the doctors' union officials about this virulent attack on the efforts to defend free health services was: “We could not believe it was the same president we met with two hours ago that has now criticized us in such a slanderous manner.”

The dead-end of trade unionist protest politics could not be clearer. A new international socialist perspective for the working class is the need of the hour.



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