

# Sri Lankan unions divide health workers over the color of uniforms

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The leadership of the Public Services United Nurses Union (PSUNU), the largest nurses union in Sri Lanka, is continuing with a divisive dispute that has already led to physical clashes between health workers. The union is demanding that the government withdraw new uniforms issued to other health employees, including hospital attendants.

The PSUNU launched the campaign on October 16, calling on nurses to wear civilian clothes to work to press the Health Minister to change the new uniforms (white trousers and shirts for males, and white frocks for females). The union leaders claimed that the disputed uniforms closely resembled those worn by nurses and could give rise to confusion among patients. They stipulated that minor staff uniforms could not be white or blue.

The PSUNU declared a three-hour strike and staged island-wide protests on November 10, insisting that hospital directors take disciplinary action against workers who wore the new uniforms.

The Joint Federation of Health Service Trade Unions (JFHSTU) and the Independent Attendants' Union (IAU) retaliated. They used the resentment among their members caused by the PSUNU campaign to deepen divisions. The IAU banned any cooperation between attendants and nurses and together with a minor staff action committee began a provocative poster campaign against the nurses.

At the November 10 protest, clashes erupted between nurses and other hospital employees outside the director's office at the National Hospital of Sri Lanka in Colombo, resulting in three nurses being injured.

Following the clashes, the PSUNU was joined by the Government Nursing Officers Union (GNOU) in staging a nation-wide strike calling for the arrest of the workers involved in the attack. In the past the GNOU

has always opposed nurses taking industrial action.

In contrast to earlier actions over working conditions, the uniform issue did not generate any rank and file enthusiasm. Many nurses ignored the union direction, continued to wear their uniforms and did not join the November 10 strike. Only a few attended the protests. At the National Hospital only 150 out of 1,300 stopped work.

When the union leaders refused to allow the members to discuss the issue at general meetings the nurses began confronting union officials at the workplaces demanding to know why they should protest against other workers' uniforms. A number of nurses told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters that they would not support any further action on the issue.

On December 1 and 10, the nurses' union issued statements threatening to take further action if the uniforms of minor staff are not changed from white to cream—a compromise finally agreed to by the unions and hospital authorities.

The conflict comes at a time when nurses and health workers are facing major attacks on their conditions and a drive by the People's Alliance government to privatise the public health system. The dispute is aimed at dividing health workers and diverting a unified fight against these attacks.

The JFHSTU leaders closed down a struggle for an 18-point log of claims earlier this year. Ironically the only demand won was for the issue of new uniforms. Uniforms have been a long-standing issue for health staff who were forced to wear ordinary sarongs and saris that were inappropriate for their work.

The Government Health Service Unions Joint Federation, which was formed on the initiative of the doctors' union, the Government Medical Officers Association, at first remained silent on the uniform

issue. After the physical clashes between nurses and other hospital employees it issued a press release. While it criticised the health ministry and the administration, the statement did not condemn the reactionary campaign by the PSUNU leaders or the equally divisive response of the other health unions.

Another notable feature in this shabby episode is the support extended by the nursing administration to the PSUNU. In the past the administration has always warned student nurses not to participate in industrial disputes but this time it encouraged them to join the protests.

While the PSUNU leadership was quick to call action on the issue of uniform color, it has opposed any struggle by nurses to defend essential conditions. Last year the union promised not to advance any economic demands on the PA government for two years and has faithfully maintained that agreement. The union has remained silent on staff shortages, increased workloads, inadequate wages, worsening working conditions and all the other burning issues facing nurses.

At the same time, the union has not opposed the Presidential Task Force (PTF) proposals for health sector reforms aimed at the privatisation of health services. Yet the union leadership claims that the uniform issue is essential to "safeguard the dignity of the nursing profession." In fact it only demonstrates the contempt that the PSUNU leaders have for other sections of health workers.

The Health Workers Action Committee (HWAC) and the United Health Workers Union (UHWU)—under the leadership of the Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka—have launched a fight to defend all hospital workers and to defeat the divisive campaign of the union bureaucrats.

The HWAC, UHWU and SEP have issued a leaflet calling on all health workers, including nurses and other hospital workers to organise a unified struggle against the attacks on public health, jobs and working conditions and to fight for a socialist program for the health industry.



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