

Sri Lankan union leaders call off health workers strike

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The All Ceylon Health Services Union (ACHSU) called off a strike by non-medical workers in the public health sector on July 4 without securing any of the strike's main demands. Union leaders worked out a deal with Health Minister P. Dayaratna to shut down industrial action even though growing numbers of workers were joining the stoppage in defiance of government intimidation.

The union called a strike of non-medical staff at the National Hospital of Sri Lanka (NHSL) on July 1 to pressure management over long-standing demands. All but a few dozen of the nearly 4,000 NHSL workers stopped work on the first day. Their demands included a 5,000-rupee (\$US50) monthly pay increase, a 7,000-rupee annual uniform allowance, a monthly risk allowance of 1,000 rupees and the resumption of a training program for hospital attendants.

Hospital workers have been agitating for these demands for nearly four years, both with the present United National Front (UNF) government and the previous People's Alliance (PA) government. Members of other unions joined the strike despite the opposition of their union leaders.

Prior to the strike, leaders of the Sri Lanka Republic Health Services Union, which is aligned with the opportunist Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), joined the National Health Services General Workers Union, controlled by the ruling United National Party, in issuing statements backing the government and appealing to workers not to participate.

As soon as the extent of the strike became clear, the government attempted to crack down. The Health Ministry issued a circular cancelling leave for all non-medical staff and threatening absentees with dismissal. The government then mobilised hundreds of soldiers to do the work of strikers and posted large numbers of

police inside and outside the hospital. Police arrested the ACHSU branch president at the National Hospital, T. H. Somaratna, on a bogus charge of threatening an employee who turned up for work.

The government has no right under Sri Lankan law—other than through the use of emergency powers—to sack striking workers or use the army against strikers. Its resort to such illegal methods was designed to intimidate workers in other hospitals and as a broader warning to the working class as a whole. Under pressure from the IMF and World Bank, government is preparing to implement drastic measures to privatise state-owned enterprises and to further restrict workers' rights.

The vast majority of strikers defied the government's threats and were joined by workers in other hospitals. By the fourth day of the strike, as the government started to intensify its repressive measures, about 20,000 out of the island's 25,000 health workers had joined the strike, paralysing the public hospital system.

Concerned that the strike was getting out of their control, the ACHSU entered talks with Health Minister Dayaratna and called off the strike. The union leaders dropped the main demand for a pay rise and accepted an interim monthly allowance of just 1,000 rupees, along with a promise that the government would raise the pay of all public servants in next year's budget. The uniform allowance was slashed to just 2,600 rupees and will only take effect from next year. In addition, the government agreed to confirm the jobs of most casual and temporary workers once their training was complete.

Union leader Samantha Koralearachchi told the press that the strike was called off "as satisfactory solutions have been given to our demands". But for workers, the "solutions" will do little to alleviate their difficulties.

The interim allowance does not cover even the increase in the cost of living since 2001, when the pay demand was first made. The official cost of living index has climbed from 2,899 in 2001 to 3,439 in June—an increase of nearly 20 percent and equivalent to 1,100 rupees.

Health workers joined the strike out of desperation. The basic starting salary for a permanent sanitary labourer is just 3,400 rupees (\$US35) a month while a trained attendant receives only 4,315 rupees. Other allowances amount to another 2,200 rupees. Substitute labourers who do the same work get a flat rate of 131 rupees a day but are not entitled to any leave. To survive, they have to work 30 days a month. Most have been waiting for years for permanency.

Due to the low wages, many workers are forced into debt. Loan repayments to the department are automatically deducted from their pay, so to bridge the gap workers are compelled to turn to money lenders who charge 10 to 20 percent interest a month. Recently an attendant at the Kanthale Base Hospital committed suicide because his debt problems had become unbearable.

Hundreds of workers at the National Hospital cannot afford to pay board in the Colombo urban area and so live on the hospital premises. It is a common sight to see workers sleeping in the corridors, on benches and under staircases.

These appalling conditions have driven workers into struggle on a number of occasions. The Joint Federation of Health Service Trade Unions (JFHSTU) called an island-wide strike in March 1999 and again in mid-1999. But union leaders shut down industrial action on the basis of false promises made by the previous PA government, generating widespread opposition to the established trade unions.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—a party based on a mixture of Sinhala chauvinism and radical, even socialist-sounding, rhetoric—exploited the disaffection to establish the ACHSU. But, it proved just as duplicitous. When health workers struck in September 2001, the ACHSU opposed the campaign and encouraged its members to scab on strikers. At the time, the JVP was seeking to cement an alliance with the Peoples Alliance, which had just lost its parliamentary majority.

A number of hospital workers told the *World*

Socialist Web Site of their disappointment at the ACHSU's decision to call off the latest strike.

C. Hettiarachchi expressed opposition to the government-union deal, saying: “I have no faith in the government promises or the union's claims. ACHSU president Samantha Koralearachchi after the negotiations said they had given consent for the privatisation of the sanitary service and hospital security services unless it interfered with the jobs and conditions of the hospital workers.”

N. Alawatta declared: “We have received a list of promises. All are subjected to a cabinet decision. Our main demand for a pay hike has been betrayed. Even the paying of meagre interim allowance has to be approved by the cabinet sub-committee appointed by the prime minister.

“I was there when the union leaders explained the agreement with the minister to call off the strike. It did not receive any support from the workers who had travelled long distances to press for the continuation of the strike until we got all our demands. As I see it, this is another betrayal and the workers must find a way out of this vicious circle of betrayals—one after the other.”



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