

Sri Lankan health workers picket parliament

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Nearly 80,000 public hospital employees across Sri Lanka submitted sick notes and did not turn up for work on Monday as part of their ongoing campaign for a 40 percent pay increase. Some 15,000 workers took part in a mass picket outside the parliamentary building, a significant number of them travelling long distances to reach Colombo from outlying areas.

Many workers have expressed their willingness to strike indefinitely—as they did in September. However, leaders from the Health Service Trade Union Alliance (HSTUA), an umbrella organisation of 54 unions, restricted the protest to one day and decided, once again, to meet with Health Minister P. Dayaratne to plead for a deal.

The union leaders had already postponed the protest once after the minister promised in writing to secure cabinet approval for the workers' demands on December 10. The minister's failure to carry out his pledge forced the HSTUA bureaucrats to take some action, but they are desperately seeking to avoid an all-out confrontation with the government.

The hospital workers, who include attendants, clerks, drivers, paramedics, health inspectors, midwives and health auxiliaries, have been campaigning since July for a pay rise to eliminate a disparity with medical officers (doctors) who were granted a 40 percent increase earlier in the year. In September, 80,000 health workers participated in an indefinite island-wide strike that lasted for 13 days before being shut down with none of their demands met.

In the course of the strike, the government illegally deployed the army to hospitals to take over the jobs of strikers and used the police to harass and arrest workers. It also sacked 1,600 substitute and casual hospital staff. But its efforts at intimidation failed and the strikers began to gather support and sympathy from other workers who also confront a sharp decline in real wages.

On September 19, more than 10,000 health workers marched through central Colombo and were joined by hundreds of supporters from offices and workplaces as well as small farmers. The same day the HSTUA leaders

called off the strike after the government agreed to reinstate the sacked workers. The unions dropped the demand for immediate pay parity and accepted the government's promise to examine the issue in conjunction with the budget in November.

A Treasury report, however, refused to even recognise that a salary anomaly existed in the health sector and complained that 3,300 million rupees (\$US35 million) would be needed annually to pay health workers if their demands were granted. Moreover, it warned: "If a preferential treatment were granted [to the health workers], other public sector employees would be dissatisfied and would, in all probability, resort to trade union action themselves."

The budget was disrupted when President Chandrika Kumaratunga precipitated a major political crisis by seizing control of three key ministries and suspending parliament for two weeks. The government immediately seized on the standoff with the president to push the demands of health workers to one side. Lands Minister Rajitha Senaratne, a member of the cabinet subcommittee appointed to examine the pay anomaly, told the press last month that the government had to consider whether it would fall or not before addressing the problems of health workers.

When the budget was finally presented on November 19, the government announced a 10 percent pay increase for all government employees from next January. The pay rise—the first since the United National Front (UNF) came to power in December 2001—was clearly aimed at placating public sector workers who have been increasingly involved in industrial action against economic restructuring and the loss of jobs and conditions.

However, the small increase, which did not even compensate for the rise in the cost of living over the past year, did not impress public sector employees, particularly in the health sector. A hospital worker angrily told the WSW: "The small pay hike given by the government in this budget is a big ploy. The government has increased

the fuel prices even before we get the so-called salary increase. It is certain that the cost of living will go over the roof of our dwellings.”

On December 2 and 3, workers attached to public health institutions walked off the job for four hours each day. Nearly 80,000 workers from across the island were involved. Union leaders promised more vigorous action if the cabinet, which was due to meet on December 3, did not approve the pay hike.

Health Minister Dayaratne reportedly phoned HSTUA leaders, accusing them of creating difficulties for the government while it was embroiled in a conflict with the president. The following day he sent a letter to HSTUA co-convenors Ravi Kumudesh and Saman Rathnapriya stating he would only be able to forward his proposals to the cabinet meeting on December 10 for a final decision. Trade union alliance leaders lost no time in calling off the partial strike action scheduled for December 9.

Significantly, the HSTUA leaders made no attempt to link the protest by health employees with other protests taking place on December 3. Thousands of private sector workers took part in a demonstration against proposed amendments to the Termination of Employment Act that will give employers extensive powers to retrench employees. On the same day, farmers from a number of rural areas travelled to Colombo to protest against the government’s plans to privatise water resources, as well as the high cost of living.

Far from unifying workers in a common struggle against the government, the HSTUA leaders have consciously sown divisions, claiming that health workers deserve more money because they have greater responsibilities and face greater risks. This narrow parochial view was expressed by an HSTUA organiser during a meeting at the National Hospital of Sri Lanka: “Our alliance is fighting to separate the health clerks, drivers and minor employees from the Joint Public Service. We need at least 50 cents more than other public sector workers.”

The government’s refusal to grant a pay increase to health workers is part of its economic restructuring agenda, which is aimed at cutting government spending, particularly on social services. In its “Regaining Sri Lanka” program, the UNF outlines detailed measures aimed at promoting private health services for those who can afford to pay, at the expense of the public health system.

The failure of the HSTUA’s perspective is leading to growing discontent among the rank-and-file. Expressing his hostility to the union leaders, a hospital attendant told

the WWS: “How many times, up to now, have they turned their backs on our struggles, showing us pieces of letters from the minister? I want to ask the alliance leaders what underhand compromise they have reached with the minister.”

It is important to note the role of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which attempts to present a more militant face to the working class. Following the end of the extended strike in September, its health sector union—the All Ceylon Health Service Union (ACHSU)—boycotted several meetings of the HSTUA executive and organised several meetings of its own. It held a separate picket in front of the Health Ministry, in which less than 100 workers participated, and opposed the December 15 HSTUA protest.

The ACHSU leaders have criticised the HSTUA but they were complicit in all the decisions taken by the alliance, including the decision to shut down the strike in September. Along with the rest of the HSTUA leadership, ACHSU president Samantha Koralearachchi called the miserable deal with the government “a considerable victory for the workers”.

While the JVP and its union leaders occasionally posture as “socialists,” their outlook is no different from the rest of the HSTUA leadership. They sense that the HSTUA leaders are becoming increasingly discredited and are simply positioning themselves to take advantage of the disaffection.

Health workers do not just need a more militant leadership, however, but an alternative political perspective. The struggle for decent living standards and essential social services requires a broad campaign to unify workers around a socialist program that challenges the prerogatives of the market and the dictates of the World Bank and IMF. That is precisely what the HSTUA and the ACHSU both refuse to do.



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