

Sri Lankan health unions call off two-day strike

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30 June 2004

At the last minute, Sri Lankan health unions belonging to the Health Services Trade Union Alliance (HSTUA) postponed a two-day strike scheduled to start yesterday after Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse promised to take action over their demands within two weeks. Union leaders took the decision despite demonstrations by health workers indicating their willingness to defy threats by the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government.

The HSTUA—a federation of nearly 50 public health sector unions—called the two-day strike to press for a series of demands including: the extension of a pay rise granted to central government workers to those employed by provincial councils; a wage increase for casual and substitute labourers; the back payment of increases to 1997; and the granting of permanency to casual and substitute workers. Union leaders declared their willingness to “fast until death” to press the case.

The HSTUA mainly covers non-medical staff in the public health system, including registered and assistant medical officers, clerks, drivers, midwives, hospital attendants, substitute workers and a section of nurses. Most are low-paid and have supported a lengthy industrial campaign for decent wages. Last Tuesday around 80,000 health workers took sick leave and participated in a one-day stoppage throughout the island. More than 10,000 health workers demonstrated in front of the health ministry in Colombo for several hours to voice their demands.

Desperate to prevent any escalation of strike action, Prime Minister Rajapakse offered HSTUA leaders a series of vague promises to call off this week’s stoppage. He agreed to a pay increase for casual and substitute workers but asked for a two-week delay to allow time to discuss pay increases with provincial councils. Salary anomalies involving registered and assistant medical officers will be referred to a salary commission.

The HSTUA decision has provided a crucial breathing

space for the UPFA, which faces six provincial council elections on July 10—that is, in less than two weeks. The minority UPFA government—a coalition between President Chandrika Kumaratunga’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—has been in power less than three months but faces rising opposition.

The health employees’ campaign is an expression of simmering discontent among Sri Lankan workers over their deteriorating living standards. The previous United National Front (UNF) government lost the April 2 general election in part because of widespread hostility to its “Regaining Sri Lanka” program of privatisation and economic restructuring dictated by the IMF and World Bank.

The HSTUA has waged a protracted campaign for increased pay, including a nationwide indefinite strike last September that lasted for 13 days. At each point, however, the HSTUA bureaucrats have accepted various government promises, which have invariably proved to be empty. The UNF government was finally forced to grant a pay hike of about 40 percent in installments in February, amid a growing political crisis that eventually led to the government’s sacking by President Kumaratunga.

When the UNF agreed to the February wage increase, the HSTUA told its members that everything had been settled. But within weeks it emerged that about 40,000 provincial council workers—nearly half of all health sector employees—would be denied the increase. After protests took place, three councils paid the rise but the other six refused, saying there was no money.

During the election campaign, the SLFP and the JVP exploited the widespread discontent over falling living standards, using populist demagoguery and by making a series of promises to workers and the poor. Health employees were told that all salary anomalies would be rectified. But having come to power, the UPFA is under

pressure to continue economic restructuring and has already begun to renege on its promises. The IMF, World Bank and other donors are withholding \$US4.5 billion in economic aid, pending peace talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and agreement on economic reforms.

Health workers confront a hostile government, which is determined that the working class should bear the burden of the country's economic crisis. Along with the Colombo media, the JVP is playing a particularly insidious role in attacking health workers for daring to fight for decent pay and conditions. The JVP, which at times claims falsely to be Marxist, is based on a mixture of Sinhala chauvinism and populist rhetoric. Last year the JVP-led All Ceylon Health Services Union (ACHSU) postured as the most militant of unions in the HSTUA campaign. Now its leaders are doing all they can to undermine a joint struggle.

Before last week's one-day strike, ACHSU leaders R.M.W. Ranasinghe and Samantha Koralearachchi met Health Minister Nimal Siripala de Silva and deliberately distanced their union from the HSTUA. In a press statement, they declared that the minister promised to solve the demands and called on workers not to participate in the protest action.

At several hospitals and health institutions, ACHSU officials confronted tough opposition as they tried to prevent workers taking part in the strike. At the Colombo South General Hospital last week, they were forced to leave the meeting. One worker who was present told the WSWs: "The ACHSU changed its tune as soon as their government came to office. Earlier they showed us a revolutionary face. Now they have become real scabs."

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On the day before the strike, JVP member Harindra Kuruppu, the secretary of the Government Pharmacists Association (GPA), appeared on TNL, a private television channel, to urge health workers not to participate. He argued that the new government should be given more time and accused the HSTUA leaders of including fresh demands in their campaign. Despite his appeal, a majority of the GPA members joined the protest.

The June issue of the JVP's trade union newspaper, *Rathu Lanka* (Red Lanka), published a vicious attack on the working class as a whole. Entitled "A trade union front to help the UNP to return to power," the article declared that some unions were involved in "a secret plan" to topple the government. It identified the health

and rail sector trade unions in particular.

"[T]he operation (against the government) will be launched in five stages," the article stated. "The first step has already been launched in the form of a media campaign. The second step will identify the fields where they have influence, inform the workers that salary increases have been scrapped and instigate trade union struggles in those fields and spread disaffection in the UPFA government."

The JVP is lining up directly with the Colombo media, which has advocated the most repressive measures to smash the campaign by health employees. A *Daily Mirror* editorial on June 23 denounced workers, stating: "It might be necessary for the government to even consider some action under the Public Security Act, though some groups suggest the Prevention of Terrorism Act, because some of these unions are acting in a manner that borders on terrorising patients." *The Island* in its editorial on June 22 cited the "parlous state of the economy" and insisted that "wildcat strikes in the state health sector should be made illegal".

During last year's indefinite strike, the UNF used army troops in public hospitals as strikebreakers and arrested a number of union leaders and militants. The JVP's comments and actions are a sharp warning that the new UPFA government is prepared to use similar, or even more draconian, measures to break the current campaign.

The JVP's role in opposing industrial action by health workers again underscores the anti-working class character of this racist organisation. In the late 1980s, JVP hit squads killed scores of workers, trade unionists and political opponents who refused to take part in its Sinhala chauvinist campaign against the Indo-Lanka Accord. Now in government for the first time, the JVP will not hesitate to use the most extreme measures to break up opposition by workers and the poor as the UPFA presses ahead with the economic reforms being demanded by big business and foreign investors.



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