

Hospital workers in northern Sri Lanka strike for better conditions

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More than 50 contract cleaners from the Jaffna teaching hospital in Sri Lanka's war-ravaged north held a three-day strike beginning on February 11 to demand improved wages and conditions. The cleaners, who are employed by labour hire firm Tharans Company, have formed an organisation Clean Well to defend their rights and demanded a daily wage of 400 rupees (\$US4), uniforms and fixed work times.

Sri Lanka's labour department has refused to recognise Clean Well, citing national labour laws that deny contract workers the right to establish unions. When the striking workers attempted to present a petition to hospital authorities on February 11, they were blocked and manhandled by security guards. "The hospital administration ignored us, saying that they have nothing to do with our problems," the cleaners told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Tharans Company responded by threatening to dismiss the strike leaders and then told cleaners that if they did not end the protest they would all be sacked. When the workers refused to be intimidated, they were informed that if the company won the next annual cleaning tender, it would consider their demands.

In 2001, as part of the government's public health cuts, hospital cleaning was handed over to private contractors who pay low wages and impose intolerable conditions on employees. While hospital workers throughout Sri Lanka face terrible conditions, cleaners at the Jaffna teaching hospital endure some of the most oppressive in the country.

Jaffna cleaners have to report to the hospital at 6 a.m. each working day but only 40 are given a day's work as the company maintains a labour pool to compensate for absentees. The average daily wage is about 250 rupees (\$US2.5), which barely covers expenses, and they can be fined over virtually any minor infraction,

including watching the hospital's televisions.

Under the terms of their employment, the cleaners have to accept at least four no-pay days a month, but receive no leave entitlements or sick pay and are not entitled to the Employees Trust Fund (ETF) or the Employees Provident Fund (EPF). They are not provided with adequate changing rooms, new uniforms, health and safety gear, or the necessary cleaning tools and are often forced to use broken equipment.

Lateness is punished with the loss of a day's pay and those late back from their brief 30-minute lunch break face pay cuts. Tharans Company employs an overseer, who treats the workers like virtual slaves, ordering them to do additional work, including other duties relating to patient care.

Many of the cleaners are young women and widows from impoverished backgrounds who have to travel long distances each day from areas such as Karainagar, Madakal, Chavakachery and Chulipuram. Several spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the harsh conditions they confront. Many complained that they often only get 19 days work a month and therefore cannot afford to send their children to school.

One 24-year-old worker said: "I have two children and I can't live on this salary. The house rent is 750 rupees and I had to pay 5,000 rupees in advance. The light bill is 400 rupees monthly and milk powder is 2,000 rupees monthly. How can we live?"

Another worker added: "I am a widow and living in Manippai. So I have to wake up at 2.30 a.m. in order to get to the hospital by 5.30 a.m., before the overseer arrives at 6. My three children are boarded out at a children's charity organisation for their studies and so I have to pay 600 rupees per month for them.

"My salary is not enough even for meals—a lunch parcel with fish is 50 rupees—so when we do not have

money we have to starve. My bus fare is 900 rupees and even a monthly bus ticket costs 600 rupees. I am living in a thatched house so during the rainy season the whole house gets wet.”

A 20-year-old female explained: “My husband abandoned me and my parents are dead. My father died when an army truck hit him. When the tsunami hit we worked for three days without going home but the administration did nothing for us. We worked hard because we believed that the government would give us permanent appointments.”

Another cleaner, who travels a long distance each day by bus, said soldiers demanding an identity card regularly delayed him at military checkpoints. The hospital, however, does not issue identity cards for all employees. He explained that he is even asked for a security card at the hospital entrance.

Conditions at Jaffna hospital reveal the impact of the country’s 20-year civil war as well as ongoing government health cuts throughout the country. The hospital, which has 30 wards and around 1,200 beds, cannot cope with its daily intake of 100-150 patients and some have to sleep on floor mats. Basic drugs are not available, which means that internal and external patients have to purchase most of the drugs from outside pharmacies.

The hospital’s equipment is in a dilapidated state and the drainage system and toilets have not been properly maintained for years, resulting in a pollution hazard for patients and staff. Machines in the hospital’s laboratory and the mortuary freezers often break down but the Ministry of Health has not approved repairs, claiming lack of funds. According to workers, hospital management has not even provided an electric bulb for the mortuary, despite several requests.

There is a severe shortage in all staff categories at the hospital, including medical officers, nurses and laboratory technicians. Although hospital staff work long hours to make up for staff shortfalls, overtime payments are not made on time and are overdue for several months.

Even though the Jaffna hospital has to cater for patients throughout the Jaffna peninsular, Wannu and Killinochchi regions and adjacent areas, it is ten years behind other main hospitals in Sri Lanka, according to hospital staff. It has no emergency service or infectious disease isolation wards and the laboratory has not even

been provided with basic computers.

Hospital services have also been disrupted by the Sri Lankan military, which occupies the area, as a result of the country’s 20-year civil war. A Sri Lankan military brigade surrounds the hospital and military permission is required to remove any corpses from the hospital mortuary, forcing people to wait for hours in order to obtain the bodies.



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