

Sri Lankan government imposes new anti-strike measures on health workers

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The Sri Lankan health ministry announced new penalties last month to apply to any health workers engaged in industrial action. The decision, contained in a circular on December 13 and backdated to September, is aimed at intimidating the country's 80,000 health sector employees, who have been engaged in a series of campaigns to improve wages and conditions.

Health workers who take industrial action now face possible pay cuts. Promotions, salary increments and applications for foreign scholarships may be affected. Casual workers seeking permanency may have their probation periods extended. Substitute and temporary workers may have black marks formally recorded against them, affecting their future employment.

Head of the health ministry, Dr. Athula Kahandaliyanage, declared: "These measures were taken as the strikes and trade union actions by various staffs in the health sector have badly affected maintaining health services." The government, however, is responsible for the rundown of public health, which, like other essential social services, including education and welfare, has been slashed to pay for its renewed war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Health workers have been involved in industrial campaigns over the past year. Most recently, they participated in protests on October 30 and 31, November 27 and 28, and December 4 and 5 to oppose a new system of time-keeping imposed on non-medical staff, involving fingerprint machines and the suspension of overtime payments for those who refused to use them.

More than 50,000 health workers, including paramedics, laboratory workers, attendants and other non-medical employees across the island took part in the two-day campaign in December. In doing so, they

defied an injunction issued by the Colombo high court in November against any industrial action.

An unnamed diabetic patient nominally sought the court injunction, but the petition bore all the hallmarks of the government's propaganda. While complaining about the breakdown of hospital services, the petition stated: "When the three armed forces are called to do these activities [maintaining hospitals], national security will be threatened."

President Mahinda Rajapakse and his ministers have repeatedly attacked striking workers for undermining the war effort, in effect accusing them of being LTTE supporters. Before the December protest, the health ministry warned that it would use the military to break the strike. Some 1,000 army, navy and police personnel were deployed to the main hospitals.

The new penalties were imposed following the campaign. Health Minister Nimal Siripala de Silva told the press: "Someone must bring this indiscipline and lawlessness in the healthcare sector to an end." The measures are being introduced as the government prepares a far-reaching restructuring of the public health sector.

The Health Master Plan (HMP) for 2007-2016 envisages reforms to "the organisational structure and management of the health system to improve efficiency, effectiveness and accountability". Plans for increased efficiency and accountability are invariably cost-cutting exercises that reduce health services and their quality as well as imposing greater burdens on workers.

The trade unions have no plans for a broad political campaign to defend health services and improve the pay and conditions of health workers. The latest campaign against the use of fingerprint machines was narrowly constrained and did not involve doctors or

nurses. In the end, the unions withdrew their opposition to the machines and accepted a government offer to pay 50 percent of withheld overtime immediately and the remainder later.

The Health Services Combined Trade Union Front (HSCTUF), which is affiliated to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), has issued no statement on the new penalties. The JVP is a Sinhala extremist party that supports all-out war against the LTTE and assisted the Rajapakse government to pass its budget last month by abstaining during the final vote. The budget included a further major increase in defence spending at the expense of essential social services such as public health.

The other major union body involved in recent campaigns is the Health Sector Trade Union Alliance (HSTUA), which is nominally independent of the major political parties. HSTUA leaders met on January 9 to discuss the ministry's latest punitive measures.

HSTUA general secretary Ravi Kumudesh told the WSWS that the health ministry circular contravened constitutionally guaranteed rights and public sector regulations. He said the unions had lodged a formal complaint with the Sri Lanka Human Rights Commission and planned to appeal to the International Labour Organisation (ILO). The HSTUA is also planning a picket outside the health ministry to demand the withdrawal of the new regulations.

Appeals to the Human Rights Commission and the ILO will not reverse these measures. What is necessary is a political campaign against the government and its renewed war, which has led directly to the imposition of new economic burdens on workers and the use of increasingly anti-democratic methods. Far from criticising the government, a HSTUA statement made a futile appeal to Rajapakse and his ministers to intervene to defend the rights of workers.

The new penalties confronting health workers are a warning that the Rajapakse government is preparing to extend such measures to other sections of the working class. Significantly, the health ministry circular applies to all employees, including doctors and nurses, who were not involved in the recent industrial action. Far from proposing a joint campaign against the penalties, the Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) and Public Services Nurses Union (PSNU) have remained silent on the measures.

The attacks on workers' rights will not stop at the public health sector. Confronted with growing popular opposition to the war and its impact on living standards, the Rajapakse government has deliberately stoked up communal tensions to divide working people and used "national security" as the pretext for ever more draconian methods to stamp out any criticism or opposition. Striking teachers, university employees, plantation workers and dock workers have all been accused of undermining the war effort by fighting for their basic rights and conditions.



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