Sri Lanka: Police state measures against nurses

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The Sri Lankan government's use of police state methods against the nurses at the Cancer Hospital in Maharagama, south of Colombo, is a warning to the entire working class. In his "economic war" to "build the nation", President Mahinda Rajapakse will not hesitate to use the full force of the state apparatus to suppress the struggles of workers to defend their job, working conditions and living standards.

Specialised chemotherapy nurses began a go-slow campaign in June to demand better safety measures and a pay increase. The government responded on July 15 by transferring all 53 chemotherapy nurses to distant hospitals. On the application of the unions, the Court of Appeal issued an order on July 22, to suspend the transfers. However, the government and health authorities completely ignored the court decision and refused to reinstate the nurses at the Maharagama hospital.

When the whole nursing staff at the Cancer Hospital staged a strike on July 28 in support of their colleagues, the government deployed navy nurses as strikebreakers. On the same day, teams of police visited the homes of the transferred chemotherapy nurses to deliver an order from the Nugegoda magistrate courts, barring them from the hospital premises. The police warned the nurses they would be arrested if they disobeyed the order.

While threatening to arrest the nurses, the government brazenly flouted the Court of Appeal decision on the basis of threadbare excuses. At a hearing on August 3, the judge reprimanded health ministry officials but took no action except to ask for an explanation on August 7. In a written submission to the court on August 10 health ministry's lawyers simply presented the government's actions as a fait accompli—the vacancies had been filled so the transferred nurses could not return. Again the court took no action and allowed a request for more time for consultations.

The trade unions—the All Ceylon Health Services Union (ACHSU), Government Nursing Officers' Association (GNOA) and Independent Health Workers Union (IHWU)—took no steps to challenge the court or to call for the health ministry to be found in contempt of court. No effort was made to mobilise a broader movement to defend the nurses as part of a wider campaign to protect jobs and conditions as well as public health services.

The chemotherapy nurses had already received considerable support. The nursing staff at the Cancer Hospital took strike action on July 22 and 27 and joined a broader sick-note campaign on July 28 that also involved health workers at other hospitals in Colombo, Kandy, Galle and Kurunegala. Outraged at the ministry's action, the relatives of cancer patients also picketed the hospital to demand the employment of experienced nurses and proper facilities in the chemotherapy units.

At the hearing on August 17, when the court was due to hand down its decision, the health ministry announced that it was offering a settlement. The deal, however, granted none of the nurses' initial demands nor did it reinstate the nurses at the Cancer Hospital. Rather it simply changed the terms of their transfer to several hospitals in or near Colombo with the opportunity to apply for transfers elsewhere. With minor amendments, the unions immediately accepted the arrangement.

The response of the Rajapakse government to the struggle by chemotherapy nurses is another indication of its autocratic methods of rule. Having used the police and military to enforce the forced transfer of the nurses, it flagrantly ignored an order by the Court of Appeals to reinstate the nurses while the case was being heard. Significantly neither the court nor the unions challenged the government's actions.

Since he plunged the country back to civil war in 2006, President Rajapakse has increasingly functioned through a

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politico-military clique that is contemptuous of parliament, the constitution and the legal system. His regime has resorted to police state measures to intimidate and silence opposition, not only from the Tamil minority, but also the media and politicians. Hundreds of people have been murdered by pro-government death squads operating with the complicity of the military.

In the course of the war, Rajapakse repeatedly branded striking workers as traitors who were undermining national security and assisting the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Following the army's defeat of the LTTE in May, the president declared that workers should sacrifice like soldiers in order to "build the nation". Rajapakse's new "economic war" is aimed at offloading the burdens of the country's deep going economic crisis onto the working class.

The government's heavy-handed treatment of a relatively small number of nurses is an indication of its fears that any struggle could act as a catalyst for far broader opposition by working people to the continuing erosion of their living standards. The Sri Lankan economy is heavily indebted due to massive military spending and has been hard hit by the global recession.

Having suppressed wages during the war, the government along with private employers is facing demands for wage rises to compensate for high inflation. Other sections of workers are opposing the slashing of social services and working conditions. In the hard hit garment industry, tens of thousands of jobs are being destroyed.

Earlier this month, employees at the Sri Jayawardenapura Hospital held two one-day pickets to oppose cuts to government funding, delays to distress loans for employees and corruption in the hospital management. Nurses in leading government hospitals in Colombo and Ragama are also preparing for industrial action over their uniform allowance, which was due to be paid from March.

The workers at the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) are preparing to hold an all-island one-day strike on August 28 for a pay rise and other demands. The CEB authorities ignored a similar one-day protest last month. The All Ceylon Port Workers Union staged a protest in front of the Khan Clock Tower in Colombo city early this month to demand an immediate pay rise and a halt to cuts in overtime payments.

Hundreds of thousands of plantation workers are also demanding a pay rise. Unemployed graduates from the University of Visual and Performing Arts established an ongoing sit-in-protest in front of the Fort Railway Station in Colombo on August 3 to demand jobs.

The government's treatment of the Cancer Hospital nurses is a warning of the police state measures that will be used to suppress any challenge from workers. No confidence can be place in the trade unions, all of which have demonstrated their complete subservience to the government and the state apparatus. In the course of the Cancer Hospital dispute, the three union bodies ended all, even token, protests against the government's actions, then collaborated with the health ministry to impose a "settlement" that accepted the forced transfers.

When asked by the WSWS about the campaign, the president of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) affiliated ACHSU, S.D. Medawatta, simply blamed the nurses for being "backward in their outlook" and "difficult to organise". In fact, the ACHSU is simply continuing the role played by JVP-aligned unions during the war in caving into the government's demands to "put the nation first". The Sinhala extremist JVP, which completely backed the communal war, has put forward its own plan for "nation building".

In the struggles ahead, other sections of workers will come into direct conflict with the government and the state apparatus posing the necessity of a revolutionary struggle against the profit system itself. That requires a break with the existing leaderships of the working class and the building of independent organisations on the basis of an international socialist program. Even the basic rights of working people will only be defended in a political fight for a workers' and farmers' government and the reorganisation of society on the basis of social need, not private profit. The Socialist Equality Party, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, is the only party that fights for this perspective.

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