

# Unions isolate Sri Lankan nurses' campaign for safety measures

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Utilising the military and the police, the Sri Lankan government and its management at the Cancer Hospital in Maharagama have stepped up their efforts to crush a nurses' campaign for critical safety measures in the chemotherapy unit.

The authorities have been assisted by the trade unions, which are working to isolate the campaign and shut down all industrial action in advance of a Court of Appeals challenge to the government's decision to transfer the chemotherapy nurses out of the hospital.

On the night of July 28, police teams visited the homes of the chemotherapy nurses, handed them letters ordering them not to enter the hospital premises and threatening them with arrest if they did. Earlier that day, the government deployed navy nurses to the Cancer Hospital to undermine a sick note protest and previous strike action taken by other nurses on July 22 and 27 in support of their chemotherapy colleagues.

Surrendering to the government's repressive measures, union leaders called off all industrial action by the Cancer Hospital nurses on July 29, including strikes and protest pickets in front of the hospital, insisting that the nurses wait until the court case had concluded. On August 6, the unions held a protest of Cancer Hospital nurses outside the Health Ministry in Colombo to demand that the ministry heed the court decision.

The conflict began in June, when the chemotherapy nurses launched a go-slow campaign over the dangers of working with powerful chemotherapy drugs. The nurses demanded protective gear, proper training, four new Cytotoxic Safety Cabinets (CSCs) and a monthly risk allowance of 10,000 rupees (about \$US90).

On July 15, Health Minister Nimal Siripala de Silva transferred all 53 chemotherapy nurses. The three unions involved in the protest—the All Ceylon Health Services Union (ACHSU), the Government Nursing Officers Association (GNOA) and the Independent Health Workers Union (IHWU)—took action in the Court of Appeals against the transfers.

On July 22, the court issued an order suspending the transfers, and has extended that order three times until August 17, the next hearing date. However, de Silva contemptuously directed the hospital management to defy the court order, and the nurses have since been prevented from reporting for duty.

On August 3, the court directed the unions to file counter-answers to objections filed by the health ministry setting out why it did not heed the earlier court order. According to union leaders, the ministry argued that it transferred the nurses for their own safety. But by replacing them with trainees the ministry has actually increased the dangers facing both patients and the new nurses now administering chemotherapy injections.

Several nurses spoke to the WSWWS, describing the July 28 police visit to the homes of their colleagues. One nurse, Kamani, had to be hospitalised after she suffered high blood pressure as a result of the intimidating police action. Maharagama police had arrived with an order from the Magistrates Court in Nugegoda, barring the entry of the 53 nurses to the Cancer Hospital, claiming that they posed a threat to the hospital's work.

While the union leaders failed to take any action over the police visit, one nurse, Chithrangani, a pregnant mother, went to the Nugegoda courts to challenge it. Her lawyer argued that the police had suppressed the Court of Appeals order suspending the nurses' transfer.

When questioned by the magistrate, the police denied any knowledge of the higher court's ruling.

The magistrate cancelled the instruction given to the police to bar the chemotherapy nurses from the hospital. But the police have continued to maintain their post outside the hospital, effectively threatening further action against the nurses if they attempt to enter.

Workers from other hospitals have begun to take action to defend their Cancer Hospital colleagues, with Colombo National Hospital workers and those at General Hospital in Kurunegala in the north-western province joining protests.

A Cancer Hospital nurse who wanted to remain anonymous because of a possible government witch hunt, told the WSWS: "We are now afraid for our jobs, particularly the transferred nurses. We have lost confidence in the government. The unions told us we could win in the court case to stop the transfers, but, as you said, due to the economic crisis there may be lots of troubles for workers and we have to prepare for that."

Asked by the WSWS about his union's refusal to oppose the government's use of the police and navy nurses, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-affiliated ACHSU president Medawatta said the union would wait for the outcome of the Court of Appeals challenge. GNOA and IHWU officials offered similar responses. At the same time, GNOA secretary Jayantha Wimalasiri tried to adopt a militant posture, claiming to have organised some pickets at other hospitals to support the Cancer Hospital nurses. But he admitted that all action had been called off at the hospital itself.

In line with the JVP's policies, the ACHSU leaders were enthusiastic supporters of President Mahinda Rajapakse's genocidal war against the Tamil masses and backed the imposition of the war's economic burden on the working class. Likewise, the GNOA and IHWU leaders made no challenge to Rajapakse's war. These unions will now accommodate themselves to the government's use of its military machine, developed in the war against the Tamils, to break workers' struggles for decent jobs, wages and conditions.

The middle class radical Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), which has an affiliated union in the health sector, has also refused to defend the nurses' struggle. Chamal Jayaneththi, a party leader, told the WSWS: "We are not going to do anything hurriedly. We are

waiting till workers come forward. After that we will take action." When challenged, he replied: "Our union represents minor staff not nurses."

In this way, the NSSP, which is deeply hostile to the unification and independent mobilisation of the working class, works to sow sectoral divisions among health workers. Like the other unions, it seeks to collaborate with either the government or the opposition right-wing United National Party (UNP).

The government's criminal disregard for the basic safety of chemotherapy nurses and patients at the Cancer Hospital is directly related to its moves to cut welfare services, including public health, under conditions where its huge war expenditure, combined with the global recession, have caused a sharp deterioration in the Sri Lankan economy. Its pledge to slash the budget deficit from 7 percent to 5 percent of GDP by 2011 will trigger further cuts in health and other services. Health sector spending has already declined as a percentage of GDP from 1.9 percent in 2007 to 1.7 percent in 2008.

The attack on the nurses is part of a broader onslaught on all public sector employees. Workers cannot defend even their basic right to safe working conditions without an alternative perspective to that of the entire political establishment—i.e., one that challenges the capitalist system itself. What is required is a political movement of the working class against the government's attacks on the basis of an international socialist program—one that puts the health and social needs of ordinary people ahead of the private profit requirements of the wealthy elite.



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