

Sri Lankan nurses' unions call off pay protest campaign

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Sri Lankan public sector nurses unions this week quickly abandoned a protest campaign over low pay and poor conditions. The biggest nurses' union, the Public Services United Nurses Union (PSUNU) led by Muruttetuwe Ananda Thera—a Buddhist monk, had called a week-long black band-wearing campaign from July 2.

By rapidly calling off the protest, the union revealed its bogus nature, which was only ever intended to divert the anger of nurses over the government's refusal to grant pay rises. President Mahinda Rajapakse's government has effectively frozen public sector wages since 2006. In the 2010 budget, presented last week, the government maintained the freeze, despite election pledges to grant rises for all workers.

Calling off the protest, the PSUNU claimed that treasury secretary P.B. Jayasundara had promised to "address" the demands by August 15. This is yet another empty promise.

The black band protest had 11 demands, the main one being to rectify the salary anomalies of nurses. Other demands were over working conditions and training programs. Far from calling for a unified fight against the government, the call for salary "anomalies" to be rectified divides nurses and other health workers according to their occupations and grades.

The All Ceylon Nurses Union (ACNU), affiliated to the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), had joined the campaign, but has also abandoned it, while blaming the PSUNU for calling it off.

Last week, many nurses wore black bands, but were angry over the empty gesture. One nurse told the WSWs: "I am a member of PSUNU. But the unions have not even called picketing. We have not been given a pay rise for many years. Some nurses have already left the union. Many of us are also thinking of leaving the union. Nurses are against the attacks on living conditions by this government."

In a handbill, the ACNU had declared that nurses had "gained no new victory for the last 10 years" and had lost what they gained previously. However, all the unions, including the ACNU, have suppressed the fight for better pay and conditions, supporting the Rajapakse government's demands for sacrifices during the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Both the JVP and the PSUNU supported Rajapakse in the 2005 presidential election, and when his government plunged the country back to war in mid-2006, the ACNU and the PSUNU vociferously backed it.

Before calling off the protest, Ananda Thera told the WSWs: "We told our members to be patient until the war finished, as we should first defend the country. Now there is a widespread resentment among our members. We had discussions with the health minister and the authorities and wrote to the president but we have no response. Now we have to do something."

Throughout the war, far from simply telling workers to be patient, the unions actively undermined any united struggle. When a public sector trade union front called a limited one-day strike in 2006, demanding a 65 percent pay increase, the PSUNU and ACNU opposed

the action. Nevertheless, their members overwhelmingly defied the union leaders and participated.

More than a year after the end of the war, the government is intensifying its attacks on living conditions. The Colombo Consumer Price Index increased by 47 percent from 140.8 in 2006 to 206.8 in 2009. Yet the government stopped paying cost of living increases in 2006. In that year, nurses received a pay rise of 1,759 rupees (\$US15.50) per month, while other health workers got an average increase of 1,000 rupees. Since then there have been no salary increases.

Another union, the Government Nursing Officers Association (GNOA), has taken a separate stance, joining a public sector trade union front campaign for a petition demanding the 2,500 rupees per month salary increase falsely promised by Rajapakse before the January presidential election. Last week's budget, however, demonstrated that the government has no intention of meeting the demand.

In the past, the GNOA posed as being different from other unions and claimed to oppose the war. It called several protest campaigns over the health workers' pay and conditions but avoided any confrontation with the government.

The government's ongoing wage freeze is bound up with the huge public debts and fiscal deficit that forced it to seek a loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) last year. In the budget, the government pledged to meet the IMF's loan conditions by slashing the deficit this year by nearly 2 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

These measures are part of the austerity measures being imposed by governments in every country as part of the new stage of the global economic crisis. The Rajapakse government has already started to cut funding for health, education and other welfare programs. In 2009, it slashed six billion rupees from capital expenditure on health. The number of government hospitals has been reduced from 619 in 2008 to 555 in 2009.

In order to impose deeper cuts, the government is enlisting the services of the unions. Delivering the budget speech, deputy finance minister Sarath Amunugama said the unions would be invited to design the future wages structure. Likewise, health minister Maithripala Sirisena has foreshadowed a trade union advisory committee to help run the health service.

Another nurse commented: "No one can bear this burden of skyrocketing cost of living. During the war, the government told us to be patient until the end of war. Now they advise us to be patient until the end of the economic war. We can't be patient anymore. But how can we fight against these burdens? We cannot trust any union. I left one union and joined another, thinking it was militant. But they have proved no different. Not only the nurses, but every state sector worker is disappointed over the government's broken promises."

Nurses and other health employees, together with all workers, face a political fight against the government and its trade union enforcers. As a first step, workers in hospitals, clinics and other workplaces need to build their own action committees independent of the trade unions and to link up to draw up their own demands and map out a campaign. Such an independent movement will only go forward to the extent that it is based on a socialist program directed at establishing a workers' and farmers' government to reorganise society on the basis of human need, not private profit.



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