Sri Lankan health union calls off nurses' strike

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Despite intense resistance among its members, the Government Nursing Officers Union (GNOU) in Sri Lanka last Monday called off a strike by nurses against the government's attack on the basic democratic right to take industrial action. The union halted the strike in order to hold discussions with Health Minister Maithripala Sirisena, but nothing has since been resolved.

The GNOU and other unions were desperate to scuttle the strike to prevent it from spreading throughout the 30,000-strong nurse workforce and to avoid a political confrontation with the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse.

Around 6,000 public health sector nurses at the main hospitals in Sri Lanka, including National Hospital, Colombo South, Hambantota, Matara, Karapitiya and Ratnapura, had been on strike since the previous Friday, demanding the unconditional withdrawal of illegal transfers imposed on 34 of their colleagues.

The health authorities transferred the nurses—24 from Colombo South and 10 from Hambantota—as punishment for engaging in protest actions. There had been a three-hour walkout on October 25 and two sit-in strikes on December 2 and 9, over demands for better salaries, decent working conditions and improved training.

However limited those campaigns, the government regarded them as a threat. The Rajapakse regime feared that the nurses could inspire other sections of the working class to fight against the government's unremitting attacks on living conditions.

The forced transfers drew immediate opposition from nurses, compelling the GNOU to call strike action in six hospitals on December 11. Many members of the pro-government Public Services United Nurses Union (PSUNU) also joined the strikes, defying the PSUNU leadership, which supported the government's actions.

A nurse from Colombo South Hospital condemned the PSUNU's role. "I am a member of the PSUNU," she told the WSWS. "The majority of our union members have participated in the strike. We consider that punishment transfers are unjustified and an attack on all of us."

A PSUNU member from Colombo National Hospital commented: "I decided to participate in this action on behalf of all nurses and other workers. If we isolate the nurses who are in the struggle, they will be defeated and the rulers will be strengthened. During the period of war, the government branded striking workers as terrorists. Now our leaders brand us as terrorists. Definitely the government will use this as a pretext for the suppression of our struggles and to witch-hunt us."

The government mobilised hundreds of police to Colombo South hospital to intimidate nurses and other hospital workers. It was a message not only to nurses but to all working people that the government would use police-state methods to crush opposition to its policies.

Instead of calling other nurses and hospital workers to join the strike, the GNOU sought a compromise agreement with the government. On Monday, GNOU President Saman Ratnapriya asked striking nurses at Colombo South whether they would like to withdraw the campaign for six hours. He said cabinet minister Vasudeva Nanayakkara and Alevi Moulana, a union leader affiliated to Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), were ready to mediate with the government.

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WSWS reporters and Socialist Equality Party supporters were present when Ratnapriya made this appeal via a mobile phone. The SEP warned nurses that Ratnapriya's request was a trap to shut down their struggle and explained the need for nurses to continue their struggle, call on other workers for support and prepare for a political struggle against the government.

Realising the dangers that would flow from halting their struggle, nurses disagreed with Ratnapriya's proposal. When he asked whether they were ready for a long struggle, nurses shouted: "Yes, we are ready."

Nevertheless, the GNOU called off the strike later that day. Ratnapriya told the *Daily Mirror* on Monday evening that the union had decided to accept an appeal from the health minister. Health Minister Maithripala Sirisena, however, has given no assurance that the punishment of the nurses will be withdrawn.

The unions are intent on shutting down the nurses' struggle, just like they betrayed last year's fight against the punitive transfer of 53 nurses at Maharagama Cancer Hospital. After nurses there struck over inadequate safety measures, the government mobilised navy nurses to break the strike and brought in police to intimidate strikers. The Maharagama nurses fought against the transfers and won support from other hospitals. However, the unions diverted the issue into court action and halted the campaign. All the health unions were responsible for this sell-out, including the GNOU, PSUNU and the All Ceylon Health Services Union (ACHSU), which is allied with the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

The JVP-allied ACHSU refused to join the latest strike, even though some of its members did so. When contacted by the WSWS, ACHSU president S.D. Medawatta claimed: "We have sent a letter to the health minister asking for a discussion to solve the problem. If there is no good response we will take a decision to go for action."

A male nurse from Colombo South told the WSWS: "Now, we have no trust in unions. You saw what Ratnapriya was trying to do. He tells us to believe Vasudeva and Moulana, the henchmen of the government." The nurse denounced the unions for dividing workers. "What we need is a common fight to defend our rights," he added.

Other nurses condemned their wages and conditions. A female Colombo South nurse said: "After deductions we get about 15 to 16 thousand rupees ($US135-144) per month. How can we manage with the skyrocketing cost of living? Now personal loans have been stopped by the authorities, citing a lack of funds. So we cannot purchase land or build a house. We hoped there would be help from the government after it ended the war. But after the budget, everyone has realised that this was only an illusion."

Another female nurse explained the deteriorating working conditions. "There is insufficient staffing of nurses and other hospital workers, so we have to do overload work. Some days we work 24 hours. But we have no shift allowances. There are no safety measures for infectious diseases. We don't know if we have caught AIDS or tuberculosis or any other such disease. Apart from that, there are no adequate facilities for patients, including beds."

The nurses' struggle has demonstrated once again that the defence of fundamental democratic rights, including the right to take industrial action to defend jobs and conditions, requires a political fight against the Rajapakse government. The trade unions openly operate as barriers in this struggle.

Nurses need to break from the unions and form their own action committees in order to campaign for support throughout the entire working class in Sri Lanka and internationally. That would be a first step for working people in building an independent political movement to fight for a workers' and farmers' government and socialist policies. What is needed is tens of billions of rupees for the public health system to provide decent well paid jobs for workers and free, high quality care for those who need it.

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