

Sri Lankan health unions abandon strike after court order

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Trade unions called off a week-old strike by paramedics in the Sri Lankan health ministry on Wednesday after a Colombo District Judge issued an interim order restraining the industrial action until March 30. Paramedics had begun to defy the court order, but the unions enforced it, complying with the government's wishes.

More than 5,000 employees in hospitals and related institutions had joined the strike, halting several services, including x-rays, laboratory tests and the issuing of medicines. Their main demands were increased allowances for on-call duty and official telephone usage, the recruitment of paramedic graduates to the service and access to promotions. Currently, 350 trained paramedic graduates have no jobs.

Just as the strike was sold out, about 12,000 hospital minor staff workers held a one-day strike, also demanding wage increases. The government immediately deployed the military at the main hospitals to intimidate the striking workers and promote strike-breaking.

The paramedics' strike was called off by the Joint Trade Union Federation of Professions Supplementary to Medicine, whose affiliates include the State Pharmaceutical Officers Union, State Medical Research and Technical Officers Union, State Technological Officers Union and the Professional Transport Officers Union.

A Colombo hospital heart patient filed the court case, stating that he was badly affected by the industrial action and requesting a restraining order. In the past, such cases have been initiated in the health ministry as part of government strike-breaking efforts. Increasingly, President Mahinda Rajapakse's government is using the

judiciary and other state institutions to break strikes, as part of the anti-democratic methods of rule it is developing against the working class.

From the outset of the strike, the government was adamant it would not grant the paramedics' demands. It feared the strike would encourage other workers, amid mounting struggles against its International Monetary Fund-dictated austerity program. Just last week, the government received trade union backing to scuttle a three-day strike by transport workers, making a flimsy promise to increase their salary in two months' time.

The paramedics' unions claimed they were "non-political" and organised the strike on the illusory basis that the workers could win their demands by pressurising the government. During the strike, however, it became plain that workers cannot defend their basic rights and conditions without a political fight against the government.

After the court order, paramedics initially continued the strike on Tuesday. More than 1,000 employees participated in a picket, defying the ruling. One worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "We are determined to win our demands despite the court order. We are opposed to stopping the strike." However, the union bureaucrats called off the strike in the evening.

When contacted by the WSWs, Joint Federation secretary Saman Jayasekera said it would prepare a struggle on the demands "after forming a joint front of other health trade unions." This bid to cover up the union's abject cave-in also seeks to sow the illusion that a broader union front would force the government to make concessions.

In reality, this is a continuation of the unions' stance from the beginning of the dispute. Though the strike began on March 13, union bureaucrats halted it the next day, hoping for a compromise with the government. But the Treasury rejected all the demands. In response to the unions' call for a 2,500-rupee (\$US23) increase in the telephone allowance, the Treasury granted only a pittance of 60 rupees. No offer was made on recruiting graduates.

Far from making concessions, the government launched a virulent propaganda campaign with the help of the mass media in a bid to provoke public opinion against the workers. When the strike resumed, the *Island* newspaper accused the workers of continuing "to demand their pound of flesh."

In order to assist critically-ill patients, the strikers provided emergency services at the hospitals. Staff at the children's hospitals and maternity homes did not withdraw from work. Nevertheless, Health Minister Maithripala Sirisena seized upon the deaths of two hospital patients to immediately blame the strikers. Without any substantiation, Sirisena also told the *Daily Mirror* that 400 patients had become critical "due to the shortage of drugs and the lack of investigations carried out in time."

The *Mirror* further cited an unnamed health official alleging that the strike was "not over any financial problems but due to other agendas that had come to the forefront." No explanation was offered of the "other agendas." The allegation dovetails with the government's nationalist campaign to brand the growing struggles of workers and the poor as manifestations of a "Western conspiracy" against Sri Lanka.

The truth is that the government has slashed health expenditure and stands responsible for not providing enough drugs and medical facilities to patients. Hospitals are plagued with shortages of doctors, nurses, paramedics, attendants and other staff.

A striker explained to the WSWs: "We perform a very responsible duty. Some days we work continuously from 8 a.m. to next day 2 a.m. We have to use our own phones for official work. We have had no promotions since 1996. I have worked for 26 years but my basic monthly salary is 26,000 rupees. I have to retire in another three years. It is unfair for me to be forced to retire without being allowed promotion."

Successive governments, including the incumbent ruling coalition, have limited health expenditure to less than 2 percent of the gross domestic product. In response to IMF's demands for deeper cuts to the budget deficit, the government last month announced cuts of 9–10 percent of this year's allocations for all ministries, except defence and economic development. It also unveiled a devaluation of the rupee and higher fuel and electricity charges, triggering a wave of price increases.

The health unions' insistence that pressure will bring results is aimed at preventing a political struggle by the working class against the government's measures. Moreover, militancy alone cannot answer the government's repression, or overcome the systemic running down of the public hospital and health system.

Workers cannot defend their interests through the trade unions that serve the needs of the ruling class. In the health sector and all other workplaces workers must break from the unions and form rank and file committees to organise a common struggle, guided by a socialist perspective.

Billions of rupees are required to provide adequate, decent health services for all, as well as to meet other basic social rights, such as education. The genuine improvement of health workers' pay and conditions can be achieved only by reorganising the economy on a socialist basis, not for profit but to fulfil human needs. The struggle for these measures is bound up with the political fight against the Rajapakse government and for the establishment of a workers' and peasants' government.



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