

Sri Lankan unions call off health workers' strike

Our correspondents
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Despite opposition and resistance from members, the public sector health trade unions in Sri Lanka shut down a strike on Thursday on the basis of a bogus promise from President Mahinda Rajapakse.

The Joint Committee of Health Service Trade Unions (JCHSTU), an alliance of 27 unions, originally called a two-day strike over several demands, including a pay rise, back-pay arrears, a two-day night shift per week and making casual workers permanent.

A march was organised from Colombo National Hospital to the presidential secretariat to hand over a petition to Rajapakse. The All Ceylon Health Service Union (ACHSU), controlled by opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), also called a separate strike.

More than 80 percent of the 47,000 health workers in relevant grades, including hospital attendants, laboratory assistants, ward clerks, telephone operators and overseers, took part in the strike on Wednesday. More than 1,000 workers came to Colombo to participate in the march. Hospitals throughout much of the country were crippled as a result.

The government deployed security forces to the hospitals as scabs in an attempt to break the strike—a further use of the military, built up during the civil war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), against the working class. Union leaders did not object to the deployment.

Vasudeva Nanayakkara, a government minister, warned members of his union, the Sri Lanka Jana Raja Health Workers Union, not to join the strike. As a consequence, workers attached to hospitals in Dickoya, Bogawanthalawa, Maskeliya, Kotagala and Wattawala did not participate, fearing reprisals.

At noon on Wednesday, JCHSTU leaders suddenly decided to stop the march, declaring that Rajapakse had offered a discussion in the evening. A majority of

workers opposed the decision and attempted to force union leaders to proceed as planned, but were overridden.

W. Roy de Silva, general secretary of the Sri Lanka Freedom Health Workers Union (SLFHWU), warned workers: “If we proceed with the march we don’t get the discussion with the president. Do you think that we could achieve our demands? The head of the state has offered us a discussion and we hope that we will get an acceptable solution.” The union is affiliated with Rajapakse’s ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).

In the evening discussion, Rajapakse demanded three months to “solve” the issues raised, saying the government lacked the funds. The JCHSTU leaders accepted this “promise” and called off a protest campaign, including a 38-day sit-in outside the Colombo National Hospital. JCHSTU convener T. H. Somarathne, told the WWS: “We believe the president’s promise and we agreed to call off all trade union actions.”

Rajapakse and his ministers have made countless such promises in the past to defuse strikes, only to throw their pledges into the dustbin later. The latest will be no different. Such was the disgust and anger among workers over the decision that no one turned up at a scheduled meeting yesterday to announce the outcome of the talks with Rajapakse.

In an attempt to distance itself from the JCHSTU, the JVP-affiliated ACHSU leader Samantha Koralearachchi told the media that his union would continue the strike on Thursday and decide further actions after that. He complained that his union was not invited to the talks.

There are no real differences between the trade union factions, simply a division of labour aimed at suppressing any independent political struggle by

health workers. While the government-aligned unions obtain phony reassurances from Rajapakse, the ACHSU postures as more militant in a bid to contain opposition among workers to the sellout.

On Wednesday, Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members campaigned among health workers in Colombo and elsewhere, distributing copies of the statement “A socialist program for health workers’ struggle” published in Sinhala on the WSWs.

Asanka, a laboratory assistant, told the WSWs: “Many of us don’t agree with the decision to stop the struggle. If we accept the government’s promise, why have we been in a struggle more than a month? None of us believe the government’s promises. If it has no money at the moment, how can it find the money in three months? What we need is to continue our struggle until we get our demands.”

A kitchen worker at Colombo National Hospital said: “My basic monthly salary is 12,600 rupees [\$US97]. With overtime work, I get some 20,000 rupees. But after deductions, my take-home salary is about 14,000 rupees per month. I am married and my wife is also working. But we can’t manage our expenses with the surging cost of living.”

A worker from Glankan hospital in Dickoya said: “We are ready to strike but we don’t have faith in any unions. If we strike, there will be no guarantee for our jobs. Nobody takes responsibility.

“We don’t have basic facilities in this hospital. We don’t have a rest room. Female workers and male workers use the same room for changing their uniforms. The unions want to pressure the government using this Uva provincial council election [on September 20] but the government said that it doesn’t have money for a salary increase.

“There have been several strikes but nothing has happened. The unions are useless. They don’t have a program to win our demands. I also don’t agree that the government doesn’t have money. They spend money for other things.” He condemned the deployment of security forces at the hospitals.

A young worker told the WSWs: “I get some 27,000 rupees per month. I have to pay 8,000 rupees as rent for my room, apart from food. I have to send money home. How can we live with this cost of living? Recently one worker retired but even after a year he still has not got his pension. Workers must fight united to win their

demands but the unions divide the workers against each other.”

Workers cannot defend their social and democratic rights by exerting pressure on the Rajapakse government. Like its counterparts around the world, the government in Sri Lanka is slashing social spending and attacking democratic rights as it seeks to impose the burden of the deepening crisis of world capitalism onto the working class. Public sector salaries have been frozen since 2006.

In line with the International Monetary Fund’s dictates, the government plans to reduce the budget deficit to 3.8 percent of gross domestic product by 2016. Rajapakse is well aware that he cannot implement further austerity measures without provoking resistance by working people. That is why the government is preparing police-state measures and whipping up Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinism to divide the working class along communal lines.

Health workers can only fight for their demands by breaking from the trade unions, which function as agents of the capitalist state, turning to other sections of workers and building an independent political movement of the working class. Above all, this involves a political fight against the Rajapakse government in the struggle for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies.



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