

Sri Lankan health workers protest wage and transport cuts during pandemic

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Government hospital workers in Sri Lanka held a series of protests in late May against the slashing of their allowances, the abolition of transport facilities and a lack of proper personal protective equipment (PPE).

The measures taken by President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's cash-strapped government include non-payment for overtime work, special and additional services and public holidays, and for leave due after 24 hours of continuous work. Private companies have also unleashed attacks on jobs, wages and social rights as the coronavirus pandemic accelerates an underlying economic crisis.

The trade unions called the protests in response to mounting anger amongst health workers. The unions involved included the All Ceylon Health Service Union (ACHSU), controlled by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the Public Services United Nurses Union (PSUNU) and the Government Nursing Officers Union (GNOU).

Fearing that workers might escalate the struggle, the unions halted the protests as soon as the health ministry "promised" to resolve the issues. Workers told the WSWs they had no faith in these official pledges and were waiting until their salary payments this month to see what happened.

On May 20, more than 200 workers at the Wathupitiwala hospital in the Gampaha district protested against non-payment of their dues for April. They also opposed the May 17 cessation of a lockdown of transport facilities.

A male nurse said the dedicated health workers had carried out an essential service during the pandemic but that "overtime payments for April were not paid." In addition, "annual salary increments for this year have not yet been paid."

This was not all. The nurse added: "We have not been

provided with proper PPE as the coronavirus spreads. Only two face masks are given to us a day but they are not according to minimal standards and not sufficient for nursing staff. The ward where I work needs at least right nurses but there are only six available."

The nurse said the danger of the pandemic spreading had increased because the country was being reopened. "The government wanted to restart work anyhow. It has no concern for people's lives," he said.

After the June 20 parliamentary election, he warned, the government would further cut wages and allowances and suppress workers' struggles. He asked why military officials had been appointed to government institutions.

The army commander heading the national task force for the prevention of COVID-19 is accused of killing innocent civilians during the 30-year anti-Tamil war in the country's north.

About 300 nursing officers also participated in a protest at the Kandy Teaching Hospital on May 20. At times, nurses there have been compelled to work 24 hours continuously, far beyond their normal 6-hour shifts. They also complained about the difficulties of travelling after the halting of transport facilities.

"Apart from ordinary face masks, standard N-95 ones recommended by the World Health Organisation are not available at any hospital," a matron at Kandy hospital said. Nurses also had to get masks and uniforms "sewn with our own money." She added: "Without thinking of our children, tiredness and danger, we work day and night. We were given false respect by being called 'Suwa Viruwo' (health heroes)."

Her basic monthly salary is 44,000 rupees (\$US265) but with overtime pay and other allowances it is about 54,000 rupees. Even though she had no deductions for

loans, she barely managed her monthly spending. About 80 percent of workers have loans. This means that their take-home pay is inadequate after their loan payments are deducted.

“People are dying en masse due to the pandemic in every country in the world. In Sri Lanka, though we were told that the pandemic was under control, the number of cases has started to rise with the reopening of the economy. The danger is increasing,” the matron explained.

On May 22, junior staff demonstrated at the Balapitiya and Walasmulla hospitals. About 300 attendants, drivers, telephone operators and sewing and other workers joined the protest. They opposed the non-payment of overtime, uniform allowances and arrears.

About 400 workers, including nurses, apothecaries, attendants and drivers, protested at the Gampaha hospital protest on May 24. The Western Provincial Council, like other provinces, ended its special transport service on May 17.

A nursing officer said: “PCR [virus] tests are carried out only for those who are suspected of accompanying infected patients. While we are not paid dues, the government tells us to donate from our salary. No one in the hospital staff has consented to cut their salary.”

More than 100 nurses took part in the picket at the Dambulla hospital on May 26. They silently held placards with slogans such as, “Are Suwa Viruwo only for television?” “Health workers are heroes only until they do duty” and “Provide a proper transport service.”

Hospital workers across all grades and union affiliations were involved in the protests. While the ACHSU called the demonstrations, PSUNU and GNOU members participated. All three unions, however, are seeking to head off a political confrontation with the government.

Dambulla hospital ACHSU branch secretary Saman Wijeratne attempted to let the government off the hook, telling the demonstration: “Although the health minister told them not to cut the allowances of nurses or health services, lower officials are not following these orders.”

The JVP, which controls the ACHSU, has pledged support for the government, attending its two all-party meetings.

After blocking health workers’ struggles, GNOU leader Saman Ratnapriya cynically “praised” nurses in

his message on World Nurses Day. “There are no reports that duties were rejected due to the unavailability of equipment, masks, goggles, dresses or boots,” he wrote. “Albeit with difficulties, all the duties are being carried out.”

PSUNU president Murutthettuwa Ananda, a Buddhist monk, is a henchman of the Rajapakse government. He has warned the government about rising opposition amongst health workers. In a letter to Major General H. S. Munasinghe, the health ministry secretary, he said that if the allowance payment issues were not resolved within 72 hours, an “unpleasant situation” would occur.

The government appointed Munasinghe, a military general, as health secretary recently as the crisis in the sector developed. Workers must take this as a warning of plans to suppress their fight.

Globally, health workers—who are in the frontline battling the pandemic—have entered major struggles, fighting the refusal of governments to provide adequate PPE and other facilities, which has exposed them and their patients to serious health dangers.

Like their counterparts around the world, the Sri Lankan unions oppose any united struggle of health workers. By calling isolated protests, they seek to divert and stifle the growing anger.

The pandemic has exposed the dilapidated nature of the country’s public health system. For the limited free health service, governments allocated only around 1.5 percent of gross domestic product until 1978. After open economic policies were imposed in 1977, the budget allocations for social programs, including health and education, were further slashed to 1.2 percent.

One of the International Monetary Fund’s recommendations for Sri Lanka is the gutting of public health to pave the way for the further boosting of private health operations.



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