

Sri Lanka: Lively discussion at Health Workers Action Committee online meeting

Our correspondents
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The Health Workers Action Committee (HWAC) in Sri Lanka held its first public meeting online on December 9 to discuss “How to fight to win the demands of health workers?”

Over 35 people participated in the meeting, including medical doctors, nurses, other health workers, university students and supporters. A health workers’ newsletter, issued by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the SEP, assisted in building the meeting.

Sakuntha Hirimuthugoda, a member of the HWAC and the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), opened the meeting, explaining the global pandemic situation and its impact on frontline health workers across the globe and in Sri Lanka.

He pointed out that, around the world, 20,000 health workers had already died from the virus. In Sri Lanka, one doctor’s death has been reported and more than 100 health workers have already been infected. Hirimuthugoda referred to the struggles of health workers internationally and in Sri Lanka saying, “these struggles have indicated the burning compulsion of health workers to fight.”

Saman Gunadasa, a member of the SEP Political Committee, delivered the main report. He pointed out that the COVID-19 pandemic was a trigger event. It had accelerated the crisis of global capitalism, which had deepened during the past decades. Capitalism, including in Sri Lanka, had placed profiteering before human lives in the course of this grave crisis.

“Governments and their pliant media are trying to normalise death and the coronavirus. COVID-19 has become the leading cause of death in almost every country. In the foremost capitalist country, the United States, deaths due to the pandemic are surpassing heart disease and cancer.”

The speaker explained how the most basic needs of the working class were incompatible with profit-hunting transnational corporations, international finance capital and multi-billionaires.

Workers, Gunadasa declared, have been forced to work under a “new normal” and to “live with the virus,” terms used by governments to cover up the danger of the pandemic

and to continue capitalist production.

Gunadasa emphasised that frontline health workers were facing enormous dangers, which was why the topic being discussed was so relevant to them.

“The trade unions in the health sector, like their counterparts elsewhere, are acting in a manner that is diametrically opposed to workers’ interests. They work as agents of the capitalist class. As we have experienced on numerous occasions, the unions divide workers according to grades, and limit their struggles, pitting one section against the others. By such actions they break the unity of workers and their class power, in order to weaken their struggles and betray them,” he said.

The speaker insisted that a strategy had to be developed for workers’ struggles. The experience of the past months of struggle had made clear that the working class could find no solution within the capitalist system. It had to go forward to take power, rallying the support of farmers and other oppressed sections, rather than having any confidence in reactionary capitalist rulers to deliver their demands.

Gunadasa proposed that health workers organise their own workers’ action committees, in hospitals and other workplaces, to unite workers across various grades and divisions and organise a common struggle to fight for their rights. Health workers, he pointed out, must unite with other sections of the working class, in the country and internationally.

The HWAC had already taken the initiative, Gunadasa declared. Along these lines, the Health Workers Action Committee issued a statement, expressing solidarity with the Colombo port workers, where the Rajapakse government had imposed the Essential Services Order. The action committee has demanded the reinstatement of the sacked Suwa Sariya ambulance workers, who revealed the unbearable conditions that they had suffered.

During the discussion, a medical officer from the teaching hospital in Peradeniya said, “Even though we are health workers, we have had to buy masks to protect ourselves and to reuse them, against medical advice.”

He pointed out that the government had to re-direct the huge sums allocated for the police, the military and big business to the health sector, to overcome the resources problem. He said that the billionaires had expanded their wealth during the pandemic, by exploiting the workers and explained how governments were using the murderous “herd immunity” policy, exposing many vulnerable people to the virus.

A medical officer from Gampola Hospital joined the discussion and emphasised that unrest among health workers had been sharpened with the onset of the pandemic. The JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna) and pseudo-left parties were trying to trap workers’ resistance into useless protests and to isolate the workers’ struggles, while the government was destroying their democratic rights and forcing health workers to take up their duties without proper protection.

The medical officer highlighted the fact that building action committees in hospitals had become an objective necessity in the face of this repression.

A nurse from the Peradeniya Teaching Hospital also spoke. “There are risks from the grading of the pandemic situation inside the hospital. For instance, clinics are considered as low risk and wards have been graded as high risk. Such grading is used to limit the supply of protective gear, which is why some of us do not have proper PPE [personal protective equipment] to effectively treat our patients.”

“We need to buy some elements of PPE, but the quality is inferior. That is why we are not comfortable carrying out our duties, either physically or mentally. If we do not have proper PPE we can be subjected to quarantine at any moment. Even our families are at risk and whole families have been isolated from society. We face a lot of issues, but this is the most fundamental issue at present.”

Another nursing officer, from the same hospital, added: “We are getting patients from all over the country and since we are wearing just a surgical mask and inferior protective gear, which we had to buy ourselves, we face a very difficult situation. We have no isolated areas to keep suspected COVID-19 patients, so all patients are being kept together. These are grave issues, but nobody in a responsible position will listen to us. We have vulnerable old parents and sick children, and we have to go back home late at night to do our housework.”

A medical officer from the Maharagama National Cancer Institute pointed out that there had been no preparations in that hospital for the workers to function in the midst of the pandemic, during early October, when the COVID-19 infection was raging.

“Management took inadequate steps, which were very late in coming. There is still no isolation ward in this hospital for

patients with the virus. Hence, the number of pandemic cases has grown and even health workers have become infected. Even now, only a very limited number of PPEs have been issued and we are compelled to reuse them.”

A medical doctor from Britain, Janaka, explained the problems facing health workers in Britain. He emphasised that businesses were totally open, in spite of the pandemic. The ruling elite was not concerned with saving lives.

He compared the situation with that in Sri Lanka and highlighted the fact that the British government and media were promoting superstition and non-scientific, indigenous medicines to deceive people, instead of spending what was required on proper health facilities.

The discussion continued with further comments and questions from the participants. One listener from Embilipitiya explained that the free health system in Sri Lanka had been destroyed by successive governments.

A student from Ruhuna University pointed out that the government was not concerned with implementing a systematic program to contain the pandemic and to provide for the basic needs of people locked down in urban low-income multi-story flats.

Other questions raised included: could health sector workers explain the truth of the pandemic to the masses, since the state propaganda was deceiving people, and was it practical for working people to obtain the profit-oriented, high-priced COVID-19 vaccination.

Gunadasa explained that the discussion had confirmed how health services were being curtailed for both patients and health workers, and the importance of launching action committees in hospitals and workplaces to counter this situation.

Only the rich were able to use the private health care system. This was also applicable to vaccinations, because there was still no arrangement organized by the government to obtain a vaccine, other than its references to WHO (World Health Organization) assurances of some vaccinations.

Gunadasa concluded by raising that when production was organised in a socialist manner, with priority being given to human need, not profit, the foundation would be laid to address all the crucial issues facing the Sri Lankan masses.



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