

Sri Lankan government mobilises army to break health workers' strike

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26 February 2021

The Rajapakse government this week mobilised the military to break a national strike by thousands of junior hospital staff who walked out in a sick-leave campaign on February 24–25.

The blatant repression of health workers' democratic right to take industrial action is a serious warning to the entire working class. The deployment, which involved a total of 185 army personnel across almost 15 hospitals, including the Colombo National Hospital, Colombo South, Peradeniya, Gampola, Badulla and Mullaithivu, was initiated by Army Commander Lieutenant General Shavendra Silva. The government falsely claimed that the military strike-breaking was in order to “avoid inconveniencing” the general public during the industrial action. While the deployment was not large enough to replace all the striking workers, it was a clear dress-rehearsal for wider state repression against workers taking industrial action.

Military strike-breaking has previously occurred under Sri Lanka's repressive emergency laws and essential service orders. This week's anti-democratic attack, however, was directly initiated by the government and the army commander. It is another indication that the Rajapakse regime plans to routinely use the military to break future industrial and political action by workers and the oppressed.

The two-day strike was launched in protest against “trainee employees” being used at the hospitals and the by-passing of formal recruitment procedures. The “trainees” are from the so-called Multi-purpose Development Task Force, established by the government last year. Health workers fear that the task force employees will be used to undermine existing jobs, salaries and working conditions.

This week's two-day action was called by the 17-union Health Service Trade Union Alliance

(HSTUA). The alliance includes the Sri Lanka Republic Health Workers Union, Sri Lanka Nidahas Employees Union and the All Ceylon Health Employees Union, which is controlled by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). While union officials directed workers to remain at home, many decided to protest outside their respective hospitals.

Following discussions between officials in charge of the sector and the unions on the first day of the industrial action, the health ministry director general announced that authorities had “decided to temporarily suspend training of trainees” in hospitals and other health institutions.

The Progressive Health Workers' Union, which is a member of the HSTUA, immediately withdrew from the industrial action. Distrustful of health ministry promises, many health workers, however, remained on strike yesterday.

On February 23, the United Health Workers Union, which is controlled by the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), held a protest march from the Colombo National Hospital to the Ministry of Health. The union, which did not participate in the February 24–25 sick-leave strike, called for job permanency, uniform allowances, a festival payment advance and other demands.

Exploiting workers' anger over numerous union betrayals, the FSP has recently begun organising new unions and front groups while posturing as an alternative “militant” leadership. The rhetoric of the FSP and its unions, however, is bogus and designed to keep workers' politically trapped within the capitalist framework.

Likewise, the industrial action called by the health unions is not designed to fight for workers' demands but to diffuse mounting popular anger over escalating

government attacks on jobs, conditions and democratic rights.

In the past year, doctors, nurses, lab employees and junior health workers have participated in strikes variously calling for the provision of proper COVID-19 personal protective equipment, full payment of delayed salaries, extended overtime work, and other demands. Hundreds of health workers have been infected with COVID-19 and at least one doctor and a health attendant killed by the virus.

Consecutive Sri Lankan governments have failed to overhaul the dilapidated health service in the past four decades. Confronted with the COVID-19 pandemic, the Rajapakse government brutally responded by reducing this year's health budget by 30 billion rupees, slashing it to just 159 billion rupees (\$US8.1 billion).

The health sector unions are completely opposed to a joint campaign of industrial action over the parlous state of the public health system and the dangerous situation facing frontline health workers. Instead, the unions have pitted one section of health worker against the other, playing directly into the hands of the government and its increasing attacks.

None of the health service unions, nor any other trade union, has opposed or condemned the government's deployment of the military. Functioning as an industrial police force, the unions are terrified that unified working-class action will bring them into direct conflict with the government and the capitalist class.

The Multi-purpose Development Task Force consists of 100,000 previously unemployed youth from low-income families from across the island. Paid only 22,500 rupees per month, they are now being used by the government in various state institutions to cut costs and undermine hard-won conditions.

The use of military strike-breakers against health workers is another indication that the government plans to use the state to crush all working-class opposition to its policies. It follows Rajapakse's insertion of retired and in-service generals into key government positions and the bolstering of authoritarian powers in preparation for a presidential dictatorship.

Last year, the government used its draconian essential services act to ban any industrial action by port workers concerned about surging coronavirus infections. It has also extended this measure to suppress strike action against the privatisation of the Colombo Port Eastern

Terminal.

This weeks' strike by health workers, which follows industrial action and protests this year by port, railway and plantation workers, is part of a rising tide of working-class struggles in defence of their jobs, wages and working conditions internationally. The fight for united action by Sri Lanka health workers poses the necessity for workers to break from the unions and to form their own independent action committees based on a socialist program.

Several workers spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*, condemning the government's deployment of the military and the unions' response.

A worker from Wathupitiwala Hospital said: "The government is trying to attack our rights by deploying the military. This is a government which uses the military for everything. When the schools were closed, the government used those facilities to station the military. We have to fight this on a united basis—that's where our strength is—but the trade unions are dividing the working class."

Rohan, a senior staff member at a Puttalam hospital, said: "The government has called the military to the hospitals, not out of any sympathy with the patients. We support this industrial action and are refusing to do the strikers' jobs. This means that hospital work has been completely halted, but our unions are not supporting this struggle."

A Peradeniya Teaching Hospital nurse said: "Not only junior staff health workers, but all health workers, including nurses, must strike in unison. We have to break down the trade union barriers and seek support from other workers in the fight against this government's militarisation program."



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