

Over 20,000 Sri Lankan health workers strike, defying government laws

Our reporters
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More than 20,000 health employees walked out for five hours across Sri Lanka on Thursday, including in the war-ravaged North and East, over a range of demands and in defiance of the Rajapakse government's "essential services" laws.

The strike, from 7 a.m. to 12 noon, involved doctors, paramedics, nurses, attendants and clerks from nine major hospitals. These included the national hospital and teaching hospitals in Colombo, as well as hospitals in Peradeniya, Kandy, Anuradhapura, Karapitiya, Rathnapura, Jaffna and Batticaloa. Health workers also participated in a national, half-hour lunch time protest demanding leave for pregnant nurses.

On Wednesday midnight, President Gotabhaya Rajapakse issued an extraordinary gazette, placing the country's health service under the Essential Public Services Act and targeting the planned stoppage. The reactionary order also applies to workers at state distribution institutions and nine provincial councils.

A week earlier, on May 27, President Rajapakse applied the Essential Services Act to ban all industrial action in the port, petroleum, gas, railway and bus transport sectors, as well as all district level government administrative offices, state banks and insurance and customs-related services.

Nearly one million Sri Lankan workers now face the criminalisation of their legitimate and democratic right to strike or take any other industrial action.

Thursday's protest was called by the Health Employees' Trade Union Unity (HETUU), a coalition of 35 health-sector unions, including the Medical Laboratory Technologists Association and the Government Nursing Officers Union (GNOU).

The HETUU called the five-hour walkout to dissipate the rising anger of health workers who are in the frontline of the fight against the coronavirus pandemic. Like their counterparts throughout the island, the health unions support the Sri Lankan government's determination to keep the "economy open," prioritising profits over human lives.

The Government Medical Officers' Association, Public

Service Nurses Union and the All Ceylon Health Employees Union, which is controlled by the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), refused to participate in the strike. Some members of these unions, however, joined Thursday's industrial action. The All Ceylon Health Employees Union held a separate protest on May 29.

Striking health workers issued a series of demands including the provision of personal protective equipment and other COVID-19 safety measures, a risk allowance, meals on working days, transport during travel-restriction periods, special leave for pregnant employees and no limits on allowances paid for working on public holidays.

Confronting a massive surge of COVID-19 infections over the past two months, health workers have been involved in a range of protests and demonstrations advancing these basic demands. The government has refused to grant any of the long-pending claims.

Hundreds of overworked health employees in understaffed and under-resourced medical facilities have been infected with COVID-19 and at least four have died in recent months.

Strikes and demonstrations by health staff and other sections of the Sri Lankan working class are part of a rising wave of resistance by workers internationally to the attempts of governments and employers to impose the economic burden of the COVID-19 pandemic on them through attacks on jobs, wages, working conditions and social rights.

The HETUU claims it will organise further action after June 8, but has not provided any specific details. GNOU leader Saman Rathnapriya issued a toothless threat, declaring that if the government failed to address health workers' demands the union would complain to the International Labour Organisation.

The health sector unions are maintaining a deathly silence over Colombo's repressive anti-strike measures, failing to even inform their members of the implications of Rajapakse's invocation of the essential services law. Other Sri Lankan trade unions, and the opposition parties, have said nothing about the use of the draconian legislation.

Workers cannot advance their struggle for improved

conditions and democratic rights without politically preparing to confront the dictatorial attacks of the government.

As yesterday's WSWs perspective explained, this means breaking from the unions and building new organisations of struggle, including independent rank-and-file action committees:

The development of the class struggle is demonstrating the objective unity of workers, irrespective of differences of nationality, ethnicity, race or gender. But this unity must be leavened by a conscious repudiation of all attempts to divide the working class.

In Sri Lanka the fight to unite Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim workers means opposing the state-sponsored "Sinhala first" policy, as well as the efforts of the Tamil bourgeoisie, who have emerged as the most vociferous proponents of Sri Lanka's subordination to Washington's war drive against China, to inculcate Tamil nationalism.

Toward this end, the International Committee of the Fourth International at its May Day online rally initiated the founding of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

Several health workers spoke with the WSWs, denouncing Rajapakse's repressive anti-strike laws and explaining the dangerous conditions in their hospitals.

A Polonnaruwa hospital worker said: "We have to deeply consider the now imposed essential service order banning strikes. This is the same law that was used against the strikers in 1980 [a reference to President J.R. Jayawardene's use of emergency laws and essential services to smash a public sector workers general strike in 1980].

"Striking workers can even be imprisoned under this order so we have to organise our own strategy against this attack. The main thing is to base this strategy on the international working class. That means forming action committees in every workplace and uniting with our international allies, as proposed by Socialist Equality Party.

"So far, there is not much awareness among health workers at the Polonnaruwa hospital and they have not started discussing this law. The trade unions carry on without any regard to these issues but it is we, the workers, who have to face the attacks."

A worker from Kandy general hospital explained that all staff at the facility joined the action across trade union divisions.

"The trade unions call actions separately. For example, one protest was on May 29, another on June 3. All the other unions are the same. This shows that they are utterly hostile to united action and fear the government will face a dangerous situation.

"Ancillary health workers in the hospital are now ready to come into struggle because of the unbearable pressure we face. We don't have safe or decent travelling facilities. Bus fares have also increased, and we are travelling in them without any social distancing."

Commenting on the government's anti-strike laws, a Jaffna Hospital nurse said: "This is like dictatorial rule. It is an anti-democratic attack on the rights of the working class and we should oppose it.

"The government used the coronavirus situation to impose the draconian laws against the people. If the spread of the coronavirus was to be prevented, then the government should have imposed a proper national lockdown and other health measures.

"I supported the strike because these demands are very important. I'm working in a ward treating coronavirus-infected patients. I've been vaccinated but our family members haven't been. I'm very concerned about them and so I'm now living separately.

"We are working in very difficult conditions. There's only one doctor on our ward and not many nurses. We are working long shifts without any relaxation and there are no proper facilities to treat workers. The males and females have to use the same bathrooms, toilets and dressing rooms. The authorities have not changed this situation, saying that they have no funds."



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