

Sri Lankan health unions shut down protests following rotten deal with government

W.A. Sunil
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Following discussions with Sri Lankan Health Minister Pavithra Wanniarachchi, the Health Employees Trade Union Collective (HETUC) announced on Tuesday that it had struck an agreement with the government covering thousands of medical employees. The HETUC includes 35 health unions, including the Medical Laboratory Technologists Association and the Government Nursing Officers Union.

The deal betrays health employees' demands in exchange for a meagre special allowance payment. It seeks to prevent further nationally-coordinated protests by health workers and provides for closer union collaboration with management.

Apart from doctors, who were granted a special allowance two weeks ago, tens of thousands of health workers have been involved in demonstrations across the island over recent weeks. On June 4, more than 20,000 of them participated in a four-hour protest called by the HETUC. This was followed by a five-hour national strike on June 11 involving over 50,000 HETUC members.

Health employees' demands included a special allowance equal to 78 percent of the basic salary; provision of personal protective equipment and other COVID-19 safety measures; meals on working days; transport during travel-restriction periods, and special leave for pregnant employees working on a contract basis.

Since the eruption of the pandemic 18 months ago, these overworked employees have attempted to cope with rising COVID-19 infections without proper safety equipment and in a run-down health system, which is the product of grossly inadequate funding by successive governments.

Under HETUC's sellout deal with the government,

all health employees, including those on contract, will be paid a special 7,500-rupee (\$US37.50) allowance. The payment, which is limited to three months, from June to August, is one fifth of the amount the union alliance had called for.

Health workers will be provided with just one mask a day, woefully inadequate and in violation of international health standards. Other demands by health workers have been met with vague promises, but any concrete measures are subject to finance ministry approval.

In a June 15 letter to Health Minister Wanniarachchi, the HETUC admitted that the 7,500-rupee allowance was "less than one fifth of the expected amount." The union body nevertheless declared that it was "content with it considering the prevailing crisis situation in the country and the essential nature of the health service."

The "crisis situation" referred to by HETUC is not the catastrophe confronting health workers and the rest of the population, but the political and economic crisis facing President Gotabaya Rajapakse's government amid rising popular opposition, strikes and protests. The HETUC's agreement is an attempt to make its members pay for the government's crisis.

The Rajapakse government and the unions equally feared that the ongoing struggle of health workers across the island would become a pole of attraction for other sections of the working class.

In recent months postal, power and water board workers, along with development and village officers and teachers have demonstrated for higher pay and improved COVID-19 safety measures.

Private sector workers, particularly in the garment industry, have held protests and threatened industrial action over coronavirus infections and management demands that they continue working during the

pandemic. Protests have also erupted in the tea plantation against pay cuts, workload increases and management-police victimisations.

Nervous about the possible eruption of mass strikes, President Rajapakse on May 27 and June 2 declared the essential public services act to criminalise any industrial action by state-sector employees.

The strike ban covers nearly a million state sector workers, including port, petroleum, gas, railway and bus transport employees, as well as district-level government administrative offices, state banks, insurance and customs-related services, health services, state consumer goods distributions institutions and all government offices at nine Provincial Councils.

Under these draconian measures, workers exercising their democratic right to take industrial action can be punished by harsh prison sentences and fines. Freedom of expression and speech endorsing or calling for industrial action is similarly punishable. Rajapakse's laws clearly indicate that Colombo is preparing for class war and authoritarian forms of rule.

Not a single trade union in Sri Lanka, including all those in the health sector, has opposed these repressive laws, indicating their tacit approval.

The HETUC deal was explicitly backed by President Rajapakse. Discussion notes with the health minister reveal that Rajapakse agreed to the 7,500-rupee allowance and that Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse prepared a cabinet paper for its approval.

In other words, the Rajapakse regime, even as it prepares to step-up its brutal repression of workers taking industrial action, continues to enlist the services of the unions and their bureaucratic apparatus.

In fact, the HETUC has escalated its collaboration with health sector management and the government. One of the points agreed to in discussion with the minister is that the trade unions will hold "weekly management meetings, headed by the director general of health services, to resolve health employees' problems."

These meetings will not serve health workers. Instead they will be used to help management undermine workers' legitimate demands so as to overcome the "crisis situation of the country" and the government.

The protests and actions of health employees and other sections of the Sri Lankan working class are a part of a rising tide of struggles by workers

internationally against government and employer efforts to impose the economic burden of the coronavirus pandemic on them.

Last weekend, the Rajapakse government, as part of its escalating attacks on the living conditions of the masses, sharply increased fuel prices, unleashing a spate of hikes to the cost of food and other essential commodities.

The HETUC's betrayal of health workers is a warning to workers throughout Sri Lanka. It makes clear, yet again, that the unions are tools of the state and big business.

In order to defend their social conditions and basic democratic rights, workers must take control of their own struggles. This requires the building of workplace action committees, independent of the trade unions and their bureaucratic apparatus and based on a socialist program.

This is the only way to unite workers across the country and internationally, all of whom face common problems and a common enemy in the capitalist profit system. The Socialist Equality Party urges workers and youth to embrace this initiative and take up the fight for a socialist and internationalist perspective.



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