

Defying anti-strike laws, 30,000 Sri Lankan nurses hold two-day sicknote protest

Our correspondents
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Public health sector nurses in Sri Lanka held a two-day national “sick-note strike” on Thursday and Friday, in defiance of President Gotabaya Rajapakse’s draconian “essential services” measures.

Apart from those involved in special services, including for treating children, cancer and COVID-19 patients, and for emergency and intensive care units, over 30,000 nurses from the 38,000-strong workforce were involved in the industrial action.

Strikes or any other form of industrial action or protest is a punishable criminal offence, under the government’s “Essential Services” Act. Anyone who breaks this law faces between two to five years’ imprisonment, and/or fines of 2,000 to 5,000 rupees. While the law affects nearly one million public sector workers, not a single Sri Lankan union, including those in the health sector, has opposed these anti-democratic measures.

The nurses’ demands include a 10,000-rupee (\$US50) disturbance, availability and transport allowance, an increased uniform allowance, a five-day working week, amendment of the nurses’ constitution, promotion after five years, and transformation of all nursing schools into universities, so that all nurses obtain a nursing degree.

The two-day protest was called by the Public Services United Nurses Union (PSUNU), Government Nursing Officers’ Association (GNOA) and the All Ceylon Nurses’ Union (ACNU). The PSUNU campaigned to bring the Rajapakse government to power and remains its supporter. The GNOA is aligned with Samagi Jana Balawegaya, the main opposition party, while the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), another bourgeois opposition party, controls the ACNU.

These unions were compelled to call the sick-note strike, in response to long-standing demands by these essential frontline workers over allowances and conditions, which have dramatically worsened with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This week’s two-day action is the third by health workers in the past 30 days. On June 4 and 11, health workers from all other categories, including nurses, paramedics and attendants, held half-day strikes over a range of demands. While doctors were not involved, the walkout involved over 20,000 health workers on June 4, and 50,000 on June 11.

The industrial action followed strikes and protests by other key public sector employees, including post, railway and power workers, as well as teachers, along with garment and plantation workers from the private sector.

The health unions, which like their counterparts across the island, oppose unified industrial action, are desperately working to discourage, isolate and finally betray the health workers’ struggles.

The Health Employees Trade Union Collective, which called the two protests in June, ended those walkouts after negotiating a sellout deal with Health Minister Pavithra Wanniarachchi. The union declared that it was “content with it [the deal], considering the prevailing crisis situation in the country and the essential nature of the health service.”

On Friday night, President Rajapakse’s media division issued a statement, which said that following discussing with the PSUNU, “the President had provided solutions to all the proposals.”

The statement indicates, however, that the nurses’ five-day-week demand has been relegated to a special committee to investigate, and the 10,000-rupee allowance has to be ratified in the government’s forthcoming November budget. Thus far, the nurses’ unions have not issued any comment, indicating that they have agreed to Rajapakse’s vague proposals.

From the outset, the unions have sought to halt the nurses’ national two-day protest. PSUNU leader Muruththetuwe Ananda, a Buddhist monk, told a press conference on June 30 that all the union’s attempts to

resolve the nurse's issues, through discussions with the government, had failed.

Ananda said he had long discussions with Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse but "the decisions" taken in those talks "have not been implemented." He warned that if nurses' demands were not granted there would be an indefinite strike from July 7.

This is empty posturing. Like the Rajapakse government, the trade unions fear that the developing struggles of health sector workers will escalate out of their control. At the same press briefing, the GNOA leader Saman Rathnapriya said that if the government made any promises on nurses' demands, even at midnight, "We will stop the protest."

The Government Medical Officers' Association (GMOA), which fully supports the government, denounced the nurses' industrial action as "extremely inhuman," and directed doctors to carry out nurses' duties in an attempt to break the strike.

The establishment media has unleashed a barrage of hostility against the striking nurses, whilst shedding crocodile tears about "suffering" patients.

"The fact remains that health sector strikes are tantamount to holding the sick to ransom... Therefore, health workers' strikes that cause tremendous suffering to the hapless public cannot be countenanced on any grounds," an editorial in the *Island* declared.

The suffering of patients and health workers, however, is a direct result of the ongoing attacks on public health services by successive Sri Lankan governments, aided and abetted by the unions, which function as tools of the state and big business.

In order to win all their demands and establish COVID-19 working conditions, health workers must take control of their struggles. This requires the building of workplace action committees in every hospital and health facility, 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. (see: "Sri Lanka: Stop the criminal mishandling of the pandemic! Lockdown the country with full compensation to those affected!") We urge workers and youth to contact the Socialist Equality Party, embrace this initiative, and take up the fight for this socialist and internationalist perspective.

Nurses spoke with WSWS reporters about the difficult conditions they confront.

A female hospital nurse, treating COVID-19 patients in Puttalam district, said: "There is only one bus to travel for all the health workers employed at the hospitals from Negombo to Kurunegala. Some nurses have to spend about three hours travelling home. We have still not been paid the risk allowance, promised during the last strike."

She criticised the health unions, including the GMOA, for dividing health workers, and accused the government of covering up the real situation with the pandemic.

Another nurse from Matara hospital said that about 1,000 nurses at her facility participated in the two-day sick-note strike. "We have to work longer hours, but are only paid 250 to 350 rupees per hour for overtime. None of us has been given any understanding of the seriousness of the essential services laws by the unions, which are against a united struggle of health workers," she said.

A nurse from Peradeniya hospital said nurses must wait for 25 years to get a supra-grade promotion.

"What is the use of it?" she asked. "We have to work 12 hours on the night shift but are not paid for the extra six hours. Our uniform allowance is inadequate. Currently we are only given 15,000 rupees for that each year."

She said that the trade unions were collaborating with the government. "I don't believe that we can win our demands by putting pressure on the government. The government will disperse our struggle, with the help of the trade unions."

Jana, a nurse from Jaffna teaching hospital, said: "We are working in a very dangerous situation. We need Personal Protective Equipment [PPE]. We are using normal masks, which are not secure for us, and although we have been vaccinated, our nurses have been infected with the coronavirus. We need N99 masks. Even though we are working in a dangerous situation, the government is not giving us the allowances or promotions we are demanding, and our families also face the same danger."

She said that the hospital's coronavirus ward was inadequate. "There is only one ICU unit and only eight beds in the corona ward. Oxygen shortages are yet to come. We are watching people dying before our eyes. We can't tolerate this situation," she added.



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