

Unions betray Sri Lankan health workers' strike

Saman Gunadasa
6 July 2021

An indefinite strike launched on Monday by around 25,000 health workers across Sri Lanka was shut down by the trade unions the next day, without any of their demands being met. The strikers were from more than 15 supplementary medicine and paramedical services, including lab technicians, public health inspectors, midwives, pharmacists, radiographers and therapists.

The Joint Council for Professions of Supplementary Medicine (JCPSM) and the Para Medical Service Front called the strike over 14 demands. These included professional and risk allowances, staff grade positions with a legitimate promotion system and the easing of workloads. The strike was called off after Health Minister Pavithra Wanniarachchi made a hollow promise to submit a “cabinet paper” on the unions’ demands next Monday.

The strike defied the draconian “essential services law” imposed by President Gotabhaya Rajapakse against almost all state sector employees. Under this law, any public sector worker involved in industrial action, including strikes, faces imprisonment of two to five years, and/or a fine of 2,000 to 5,000 rupees, along with the loss of professional or vocational registration.

Amid the worsening COVID-19 pandemic, frontline health workers confront increased workloads and risks to themselves and their family members. Moreover, a host of issues related to pay and conditions from the pre-pandemic period have been greatly exacerbated. As a result, the unions were forced to call the strike in a bid to deflect mounting anger.

JCPSM chairperson Ravi Kumudesh emphasised at a press conference Monday that the unions had tried to resolve longstanding grievances for years without resorting to industrial action. He said the unions had launched the strike unwillingly and pleaded with the government to at least “put a plaster to our wound.” If

that happened, he declared, workers would report back to work at once, signalling the willingness of the unions to betray the struggle.

As a leader of the Health Employees Trade Union Collective (HETUC), Kumudesh also stitched up a sell-out deal with the government on June 15, covering around 100,000 employees. It set aside all their demands in exchange for a miserable 7,500 rupees (\$US38) special allowance payment.

The deal sabotaged the campaign of nationally-coordinated protests by around 50,000 health workers who stopped work on June 11 and held widespread demonstrations. Workers also held a strike on June 4. The demands included a special allowance equal to 78 percent of the basic salary, as well as the provision of personal protective equipment and other COVID-19 safety measures.

Kumudesh and the other union leaders sought to isolate the latest strike from other sections of health workers who have also taken industrial action. On July 1-2, around 30,000 public health nurses, comprising more over 90 percent of the workforce, launched a sick-note campaign on a list of demands, including a 10,000-rupee disturbance, availability and transport allowance, an increased uniform allowance and a five-day working week.

The three unions that organised the strike—the Public Services United Nurses Union (PSUNU), Government Nursing Officers Association (GNOA) and the All Ceylon Nurses Union (ACNU)—sought to shut it down as quickly as possible.

PSUNU leader Muruththettuwe Ananda, a close supporter of the government, met with President Rajapakse on July 2. After the meeting, the president issued a media statement saying that five out of seven demands would be granted, while the others would be

considered in next year's budget. The announcement was quickly exposed as bogus, as no cabinet decision to endorse it has materialised.

The Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) covering doctors, which is a close ally of the current government, immediately seized on the announcement to foster divisions among health workers. The GMOA warned the government that granting the demands of nurses "will lead to agitation among not only the health sector, but in all categories of government services," and thus impact on the "smooth functions of the government service."

Nurses have expressed their disgust toward the trade unions on social media. A nurse from Gampola hospital told the WSWS: "Even though the strike was stopped, nothing has been obtained. Only some promises, just like the end of every struggle."

The supplementary medicine and paramedical services workers who participated in the latest strike are also hostile to the unions' actions.

A striking ECG technician from Polonnaruwa hospital told the WSWS: "The trade unions are working with the government to burden workers with unbearable workloads. We can't win demands by fighting in isolation. Workers will have to get together and fight."

A public health inspector from Kurunegala said: "It's disgusting that the role of the trade unions is setting sections of the workers against each other. This situation is used by the government to provoke public hatred against us for the government's mishandling of COVID-19."

The corporate media outlets have repeatedly denounced the struggles of health workers. An editorial in the *Island* on July 6 declared that "this certainly is not the time to strike." It added: "[I]t is wrong for the health workers, or other state employees for that matter, to resort to trade union action during the current health crisis."

Successive governments, assisted by the trade unions, have a track record of setting one category of health workers against another to prevent a united struggle around their common burning issues.

The Health Workers Action Committee, formed at the political initiative of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) intervened in the latest health workers' strike, issuing a statement on July 5, entitled "Defeat the grade-based

divisive conspiracies of the trade union bureaucracy! Organise a united struggle of health and other workers!"

It declared: "We must take the fight to defend our rights into our own hands. This is possible only through the formation of action committees formed through our democratic vote, independent of the trade unions that line up with the government and health authorities. As the Health Workers Action Committee, we will assist you in building action committees in every hospital and health centre.

"Our struggle should not be confined to the field of health. The trade unions are working to suppress the struggles. We must obtain support from the national and international working class, as well as other oppressed layers including farmers and students.

"The developing situation, with the exacerbation of the economic crisis by the raging coronavirus pandemic, has paved the way for us to unite with the growing struggles of the workers around the world against the attacks of capitalist governments.

"Struggles have erupted in the health sectors of India, Europe, Australia, New Zealand and the US. In Massachusetts, the strike of 700 nurses in the Saint Vincent hospital has reached its fourth month.

"We must fight to unite these struggles on an international socialist perspective. It is crucial to support the call made by the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world party of the socialist revolution, to build an International Workers Alliance that integrates the action committees that we build."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact