

30,000 Sri Lankan health workers protest inadequate COVID-19 protection

Our reporters

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Around 30,000 Sri Lankan state sector health employees held nationwide lunch time protests yesterday, in defiance of the government's anti-democratic essential public services law, to demand improved COVID-19 protection amid rising infections and deaths across the country.

Those involved included nurses, paramedics, midwives, public health inspectors, attendants, and office staff. The health unions have announced a five-hour strike on September 27, if the government does not address their demands.

Public health is one of the many state sectors declared essential services by the government at the end of May. Under this law, harsh punishment, including long jail terms and heavy fines, can be imposed on any worker involved industrial action and "inducing" or "inciting" such action. On August 30, President Rajapakse also proclaimed a state of emergency that can be extended to ban strikes and to sack and arrest workers.

There are around 1,103 state hospitals in Sri Lanka. Yesterday's action involved workers from all of these hospitals, including major institutions such as the Colombo National Hospital, along with teaching hospitals in Colombo north and south. Workers from hospitals in Karapitiya, Galle, Matara, Anuradhapura, Jaffna, Badulla, Batticaloa, Kandy and Peradeniya also participated. Maternity and children's hospitals, as well as emergency and intensive care units and COVID-19 treatment facilities, were exempted.

The lunchtime protest was called by the health sector union collective—a loose alliance of 44 health sector unions. Those participating included members of the Government Nurse Officers Union, Medical Laboratory Technologists Alliance, Janaraja Health Employees Union, and the All Ceylon Health Workers Union, led by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Health Service Union, which is affiliated with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party. The Public Services United Nurses Union, which is associated with President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's regime, did not join the campaign.

The health unions are demanding the government continue

a special 7,500- rupee (\$US37) allowance, paid over the last three months, and special leave for those with higher workloads caused by the coronavirus. Health workers also want safe transport to and from their workplaces, as well as better working conditions and proper provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

In June and July, thousands of health employees launched powerful protests and other action, demanding special allowances, salary increases and improved health safety measures. Demonstrations were held on June 4 and 11, involving 20,000 and 50,000 health employees respectively.

More than 30,000 nurses held a two-day "sick note" campaign on July 1–2. Three days later, on July 5, over 25,000 supplementary medicine and paramedical services employees began an indefinite strike. These actions were shut down by the health unions, who accepted a series of bogus government promises.

Having betrayed these struggles, the unions called yesterday's protests in response to rising anger among health workers, over dangerous and worsening conditions, in state sector health facilities.

The Health Employees Action Committee, initiated by the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka), intervened in yesterday's protests, distributing a statement entitled "Health workers! Let us take the struggle for demands into our hands!" Excerpts from that statement are published below.

*Amid the difficult working conditions exacerbated by the pandemic, there is a burning need for the continuous provision of special monthly allowances, special leave and assurances of our own healthcare.

* For most hospital wards, only one third of the required PPE is being provided. Therefore, we are forced to reuse the same dressings after washing them, which means they are unusable. A threat to our lives emerges in this situation. Health authorities claim we are being infected because of our own negligence and are frequently issuing circulars on how we should behave!

* One of the main issues we face is the lack of transport facilities during the government's limited lockdown. Several of us have been forced to spend between 500 and 750 rupees daily on transport. Other workers have to spend a good portion of their salaries on transport and meals.

* Infected health workers have to return to work after 10 days, while those who do not show symptoms have to keep working continuously. This has deadly consequences for both healthy workers and the patients they treat. Although the official figures have been hidden, at least 6,000 health employees have so far been infected and several have died. Infections among our own family members are also increasing, and some of them have also died.

We are determined to take forward our fight until we win our demands, but determination alone is not enough, as proven by our past struggles. It is essential to identify the real challenges we face and adopt a scientific program.

The government's mantra in response to every workers' struggle is that it cannot grant any demands because of the enormous economic crisis facing the country. Strike action by 250,000 teachers, who are demanding higher pay, has entered its third month, because the government has rejected their claims. Recently, the finance ministry ordered cuts in state expenditure and for an end to new job recruitment in every public institution, including the health and education ministries.

Time and time again, the trade unions have held closed-door talks with the government, offering advice and negotiating over how the burden of the economic crisis can be imposed on their members.

The struggle of health workers began on June 11, for a special allowance equal to 78 percent of the basic salary. This was betrayed by the health union collective, which accepted the government's proposal of just of 7,500 rupees and for only three months. In fact, we are being forced to repeat our original claims, because the unions accepted the government's slashed allowance.

The teachers' unions are also seeking a deal proposed by the government, which slashes their original demand to a third of their original claims and without the consent of their members.

At the same time, the government is stepping up its preparations to crackdown on workers, now coming into struggles over their legitimate rights. Last May, it imposed the "essential public service act," bringing many state institutions under this edict. Under this decree, industrial action has been banned and harsh penalties imposed for "violation" of these regulations.

Last month, the government declared a national state of emergency in the country, on the pretext of supplying essential food items and imposing price controls. This

draconian law can be extended against all workers' struggles.

The trade unions, including those in the health sector, are hiding from working people the dangers posed by these repressive laws. The unions remain completely silent about these measures, which is tantamount to approving them, because they defend the government and the capitalist system.

Like its international counterparts, the Rajapakse government has turned to authoritarian forms of rule, in order to impose the burden of the economic crisis on working people and to brutally suppress these struggles.

In these circumstances, workers cannot win their demands by pressuring capitalist regimes. That is why we need to take the struggle for our rights into our own hands. It is essential that health workers build action committees, independent of the unions, at hospitals and other health institutions. These committees will be democratically controlled by their members. While we have already built such committees in some hospitals, we need to expand them to every hospital.

We also have to prepare politically to take forward this struggle. Without defeating the policies of the government and the capitalist class, which is determined to impose the economic crisis on our backs, we cannot win our demands. We are not responsible for their crisis. We have to fight for an alternative program that ends the social order that puts profits before human lives.

The unions, which are utterly hostile to such a perspective, have called the current protest actions in order to dissipate the growing militancy of their members and divert them behind claims that it is possible to pressure the government.

While organising the struggle across all grade divisions and to unite health employees, we should also reach out to all other workers, who face common problems like us. We should immediately extend our support to the teachers' struggle.

The Health Workers Action Committee calls on workers in the health and other sectors to build these independent workers organisations, and a network of such committees. We must support the struggle to build an international alliance of rank-and-file committees, uniting with workers in countries throughout the world.



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