

Thousands of health workers strike in Sri Lanka

Our reporters
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Around 90,000 health employees from more than 1,000 hospitals, including in the war-ravaged North and East, walked out for five hours across Sri Lanka on Monday to oppose the government's decision to slash the pandemic-related 7,500-rupee (\$US37) monthly allowance paid over the past three months.

Among other major demands of the health workers were special leave for those with higher workloads caused by the COVID-19 disaster, safe transport to and from their workplaces and proper provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Health workers held a nationwide lunchtime protest on September 22 over the same issues.

Nurses, paramedics, midwives, public health inspectors, attendants and office staff joined Monday's strike, defying the draconian "essential services law" imposed by President Gotabhaya Rajapakse to ban strikes by almost all state sector employees.

Under the essential services order, harsh punishments, including lengthy jail terms and heavy fines, can be imposed on any workers involved in industrial action or "inducing" or "inciting" such action. On August 30, Rajapakse also proclaimed a state of emergency—on the pretext of dealing with shortages of essential food items, including rice and sugar—which can be extended to ban strikes and to sack and arrest workers.

The strike was called by the Health Sector Union Collective (HSUC), a loose alliance of 44 health sector unions, including the Government Nurse Officers Union (GNOU), Medical Laboratory Technologists Alliance, Janaraja Health Employees Union and the All Ceylon Health Workers Union, led by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

The Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) and the Public Service United Nurses Union

(PSUNU) did not participate in the strike. Both unions helped bring the Rajapakse government to power. However, their members rejected the decision and joined other workers in lunchtime protests, demonstrating growing support for a united struggle.

Feigning concern for the problems of health workers, GNOU leader Saman Ratnapriya told a news conference the government had "slashed the 7,500 rupees' allowance" that health workers had been granted to bear additional transport costs because no public transport was functioning during the coronavirus lockdown.

Ratnapriya spoke as if he had just woken up from a coma. The struggle of health workers began on June 11, demanding a special allowance equal to 78 percent of the basic salary. As the union leaders have done repeatedly, they betrayed that struggle, accepting the government's proposal of just 7,500 rupees and for only three months.

In fact, workers fought back because the unions accepted the government's reduced allowance. In June and July, thousands of health employees launched powerful protests and other actions, 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. The health unions shut down these actions, accepting a series of bogus government promises.

The unions only called last week's protest and Monday's strike because of rising anger among health workers over dangerous and worsening conditions in

state sector health facilities due to the pandemic.

Although no official figures have been published, at least 6,000 health employees have been infected so far and several have died. Infections among their family members are increasing too, and some have also died.

For most hospital wards, only one third of the required PPE is being provided. Health workers are forced to reuse dressings again and again after washing. The lack of transport facilities during the government's limited lockdown has forced them to spend between 500 and 750 rupees daily on transport.

Although the conditions of all workers are dire, the government continues to reject the demands of workers in every sector, citing the country's economic crisis.

Strike action by 250,000 teachers, who are demanding higher pay, has entered its third month. The repression being prepared by the government against the teachers is a warning to all workers, including health workers. Public Security Minister Sarath Weerasekara has threatened that the teachers' strike will be "suppressed in a manner that we defeated terrorism," effectively labelling striking teachers as "terrorists."

Deputy Director General of Health Services Hemantha Herath expressed the ruling class's hostility to the health workers' struggle. He accused the workers of being responsible for the resurgence of the coronavirus. "We are at a time where the pandemic has been brought under control to some extent," he said. "The last time we saw that this control collapsed with union actions. Both the organisers and the participants must act responsibly to prevent such a situation happening again."

Members of the Health Workers Action Committee (HWAC), established under the political initiative and guidance of the Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka, intervened among striking health workers at Kandy National hospital, Gampola base hospital and Maharagama cancer hospital, distributing a statement entitled, "Health workers! Let us take the struggle for demands into our hands!"

A Kandy hospital clinical worker said the unions had not taken any action except announcing the strike, and the workers themselves had begun the struggle. "I am against stopping the struggles from time to time. We can no longer allow trade unions to make decisions behind our backs."

A PSUNU member nurse who did not participate in the stoppage at Gampola hospital said she agreed with the strike's demands and wanted to join, but hesitated because the union leadership could oppose that.

The HWAC statement said workers throughout the world are finding that their basic demands cannot be won by exerting pressure on governments, as promoted by the unions. Instead, governments are increasingly imposing the burden of the economic crisis, escalated by the pandemic, and moving toward dictatorial forms of rule.

"Under these conditions, taking our struggle forward requires a political program to challenge bourgeois governments and the capitalist system. Unions, which are tightly tied to the capitalist system, are completely hostile to such a struggle...

"Therefore, we, health workers must establish independent action committees at hospitals and other health institutes. We must take the struggle into our hands through such committees in which decisions are taken through democratic discussions among members.

"This struggle, which must be organised within the health service, cutting across divisions of various categories, must be brought to all sections of the working class who are hit by the heavy cost of living and the pandemic. Especially, the health workers' struggle must be united with the ongoing teachers' struggle.

"The HWAC invites all workers in the health sector and all other sectors, to form such action committees at their workplaces. We must build a network of those committees. We fight to build an International Workers Alliance of Rank of File Committees, joining with action committees of workers in other countries."



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