

Sri Lankan health workers join national stoppage

Our correspondents
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Around 25,000 health workers, including in Sri Lanka's war-ravaged north and east, struck work last Friday for five hours from morning to noon, demanding the reinstatement of a special COVID-19 monthly allowance. This strike followed a lunchtime protest on September 22 and a countrywide health workers' strike on September 27, mainly on the same demand.

Striking health workers from National Hospitals in Colombo and Kandy, Colombo South Hospital in Kalubowila, Karapitiya Hospital in Galle, and other hospitals, including Matara, Nuwara Eliya, Badulla, Gampola, Maligawatte, Avissawella and Muthur in Eastern Province, joined picket lines in front of their hospitals. They displayed placards of their demands and chanted slogans for around an hour before returning to work.

The government stopped the pandemic allowance from September, after providing it for three months. Health workers had been involved in countrywide struggles, including protests and a strike on June 11, demanding a special allowance equal to 78 percent of their basic salary, due to unsafe conditions and heavy workloads in the pandemic. The trade unions betrayed the campaign by agreeing to a 7,500-rupee (\$US37) allowance, just one fifth of the workers' demand.

Other demands of the health workers, raised in Friday's strike, include adequate provision of personal protective equipment (PPE), safe transport to and from workplaces, special leave for workers with increased workloads due to the pandemic, the filling of vacancies, and overtime and holiday payments for work performed without limitations.

Nurses, attendants, paramedics, office staff and junior staff took part in the industrial action, defying President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's draconian essential services law, which threatens jail terms up to five years for

participation in such stoppages. Public Security Minister Sarath Weerasekara had threatened "severe actions" against strikers, referring to the October 6 countrywide demonstrations of schoolteachers, who have been on an online teaching strike for three months demanding a wage rise.

The industrial action was not held in all hospitals. Health workers expressed their disgust at the unions' poor organisation of the strike. In some hospitals, health workers said they were not informed about the strike at all.

A junior staff member at Apeksha Hospital in Maharagama told the WSWS: "The unions were compelled to call the strike due to workers' pressure. They did that with reluctance and their real objective is to liquidate the struggle."

The Health Sector Union Collective (HSUC), an alliance of 44 health unions covering nurses, paramedics, junior staff and office staff, called the strike. The Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) and the Public Service United Nurses Union (PSUNU), which openly backs the government, did not support the strike.

PSUNU leader and Buddhist monk Muruthettuwe Ananda personally intervened in some hospitals, demanding that workers not join the strike, bogusly claiming that the government had promised to fulfill their demands. PSUNU members had defied his orders and joined the last strike on September 27.

The trade unions, including those in the HSUC, have been isolating the health workers' struggle from other sections of workers and driving it to the blind alley of trying to pressure the government and health authorities.

Saman Ratnapriya, the leader of the Government Nursing Officers Union (GNOU), a key member of the

HSUC, told a media conference during the strike that the sole target was to obtain a “discussion” with the government. If the government did not convene a discussion, the unions would intensify their pressure, he said. Asked what the HSUC would do if there were no solution to the strike, he said: “Some struggles are dragging like this.”

In fact, the health workers’ demands have been “dragging” for years already, with the unions repeatedly selling them out on the basis of the government’s empty promises.

Striking health workers expressed their disgust during discussions with members of the Health Workers Action Committee (HWAC), established at the initiative of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP).

A nurse from Kandy Hospital said: “Even though I support the strike, I have no hope this fight will win. The government has cut six billion rupees from the health budget for next year. They are going to cut the remaining allowances. All essentials are skyrocketing. Trade unions rip off 250 rupees from our monthly salaries. We should have an alternative.”

Another Kandy Hospital nurse said: “We cannot depend on these bankrupt trade union struggles. What I see is that uniting trade unions as one organisation is not a viable task. Even this time, some government-inclined trade unions did not support the strike. Hence I accept that independent action committees are the form we should take forward.”

A junior staff worker from Gampola Hospital said: “The trade unions are dividing the workers and these divisions serve the purpose of the government. I agree that we have to establish unity not only among ourselves as health workers but also with striking teachers and the rest of the working class to win the struggle.”

HWAC members distributed a statement titled: “Let us unite our struggle with other workers’ struggles and take it forward with a socialist program!,” among striking workers at the hospitals in Kandy, Gampola and Maharagama.

The statement explained the importance of uniting the health workers across the grades and uniting with the other workers’ struggles, as the working class confronted the government onslaught as a whole.

The HWAC statement pointed out how the experience of previous union actions showed that

health workers’ burning issues could not be solved by trying to apply pressure to governments. It explained that the Rajapakse government, amid the economic, political and social crisis intensified by the pandemic, was working to boost big business profits by carrying out massive attacks on the living conditions of the working class and oppressed masses, and strengthening state repression against their struggles.

The statement concluded: “Under these conditions, the HWAC insists that there is no other alternative for workers than winning their rights by going forward to the establishment of a workers’ and peasants’ government, which will implement socialist policies, overthrowing bourgeois rule. This government, which will be established as a part of a union of socialist republics internationally, will nationalise the giant banks, factories and plantations under workers’ control and jointly fight with the international working class to reorganise the global economy to fulfill human needs rather than capitalist profit interests.”

As “the unions, which are closely bound to the capitalist system, are utterly hostile to this program,” the statement called on all workers, including health employees, “to break from the unions and build rank-and-file committees as organisations through which they can take decisions democratically and take forward the struggles on that program.”

Explaining the need to build such committees at all hospitals and health care centres, cutting across grade divisions, the statement said: “We insist that this struggle against international finance capital cannot be won without a unified struggle with millions of international workers who face similar attacks and have also come to similar struggles. That is why we are fighting for an International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.”



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