

Over 50,000 Sri Lankan health workers strike for higher pay and allowances

Our reporters

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More than 50,000 public sector health workers in Sri Lanka held a two-day sick leave strike on November 24 and 25 to protest the government's repeated rejection of their demands. Nurses, supplementary and interim health officers, and laboratory technicians were involved in the national campaign.

According to the Health Professionals Collective (HPC), an alliance of several trade unions, workers from 1,100 hospitals and 365 medical health service offices were involved in the walkout.

The central demands included rectification of salary anomalies as recommended by the Ranugge Salary Commission Report, an increased monthly allowance for night duty, higher transport and on-call duty allowances (from 3,000 rupees [\$US15] to 10,000 rupees), better overtime rates and improved promotion procedures. If the commission report recommendations are implemented, the monthly salaries of health employees are expected to rise by 3,000 to 5,000 rupees.

Last week's action was the third by public sector health workers in the past three weeks, including a sick-note campaign on November 9 and a mass protest outside the health ministry on November 17.

The Government Nursing Officers Union (GNOU) declared on its Facebook page that the November 9 protest was to remind the government that it had promised in its budget later that week to resolve the demands of public health workers. The union warned that there would be further action if they were not granted.

The GNOU and other health sector unions previously seized on bogus government pledges as a pretext to block or call off industrial action. While the HPC called last week's action to try and dissipate health workers' rising anger, the mass response highlights workers'

determination to fight the government.

Two days before the strike, Health Minister Keheliya Rambukwella held a discussion with the pro-government Public Service United Nurses Union (PSUNU) in an attempt to undermine the sick-leave strike. The PSUNU is not part of the HPC.

Rambukwella falsely promised PSUNU leader Muruththettuwe Ananda, who is a Buddhist monk, that the government would increase some allowances and overtime payment rates when the government budget is implemented.

While the PSUNU did not participate in last week's action, most of its members were involved in the strike. The HPC has announced it will hold another protest Wednesday.

Notwithstanding various tactical differences between the health sector unions all peddle illusions that the government can be pressured into granting workers' demands.

During last week's strike, HPC leader Ravi Kumudesh issued a pathetic appeal to President Gotabhaya Rajapakse, declaring that "the token strike could have been easily avoided if the health authorities had been flexible enough to listen to us." He then begged the president, the prime minister and health minister to "step in and solve this issue. Don't let it escalate and inconvenience the people."

The fears of Kumudesh and the rest of the health sector union bureaucracy is that the health workers' struggle will become a focal point for other sections of the working class, bringing them into direct political confrontation with the government.

The past weeks have seen strikes and demonstrations by teachers, port, petroleum and power workers and plantation workers, while today tens of thousands of other public sector employees begin a week-long

industrial campaign and protest for higher wages. These struggles are part of a developing wave of industrial action by workers internationally.

Last week, the Health Workers Action Committee (HWAC), an independent rank-and-file organisation of health workers initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, intervened in the protests, distributing a statement on the program needed to take forward the struggle.

“This year alone, the number of campaigns called by the health workers' unions exceeds 25. The unions that called these actions—separately or collectively—did not serve the interests of the workers but betrayed them, while serving needs of the government,” the statement said.

“In presenting his harsh austerity budget, Finance Minister Basil Rajapakse said, ‘The public sector is an unbearable burden’ and added, ‘[F]or at least one more year, there is absolutely no way we can spend public money on government sector employees.’ True to these statements, the government has now unleashed a sharp attack on the public sector, including the health service.

“The government has cut 6 billion rupees from the health sector for 2022, compared to its allocation for 2021. While the COVID-19 continues to spread, next year's expenditure for the sector that is fighting to control the deadly virus has been cut by 6 billion rupees—from 18 billion rupees to 12 billion rupees.”

“Amid rising numbers of coronavirus cases and insufficient numbers of employees, the difficult conditions we already faced have worsened and now we confront further rises in the cost of living because the government has removed price controls on the price of essentials. Like all other workers and the poor, we face common problems and need to be involved in a common fight to defend living and social conditions,” the statement said.

The HWAC statement called for:

- Increases in pandemic-related allowances for health sector employees and personal protective equipment (PPE) for all hospital employees
- COVID-19-safe travelling facilities for all health workers
- A sliding scale of wages in line with the rising cost of living
- Billions of rupees for the public health service in order to develop a modern, high-quality health infrastructure to combat the raging coronavirus

pandemic.

The statement added: “In fighting for these demands, health workers must turn to and unite with workers in other sectors. In order to challenge and defeat the government's austerity attacks we need a political program.

“The unions operate as an industrial police force for the government as it does everything it can to defend and boost the profit system.

“We need to build action committees, independent of unions, in every workplace, which will enable us to reach out to other workers in struggle and our international class brothers and sisters.

“We advance a program that fights for reorganising production according to human need not for the profits of a few. This is political program based on the fight for international socialism.”

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with health workers in several hospitals who voiced their support for the HWAC's campaign.

Emphasising the need for united action by the working class, a nurse from the Gampola Hospital said: “If we fight, we have to unite and launch a struggle. Strikes and campaigns have to be organised on a correct program. We cannot win our demands through trade union protests, which are just limiting us.”

A male nurse from the same hospital said that the unions were the main barrier to the unification of the working class. “The unions betray our struggles because they want to avoid any collision with the capitalist class. Health workers still face the same problems they faced 25 years ago, problems that the unions have not solved.”

A Kandy national hospital mental health nurse said: “Even if the paltry amount being demanded by the unions is granted, we cannot live on this today. Every worker needs a salary increase sufficient for a decent living.”



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