

Thousands of Sri Lankan health workers hold one-day strike in Western Province

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Tens of thousands of health workers in Sri Lanka's Western Province, including nurses, supplementary and interim health officers and laboratory technicians, stopped work on January 26. About 1,000 demonstrated in the streets near the National Hospital in Colombo and then rallied outside the health ministry located nearby.

The strikers are demanding the rectification of salary anomalies, higher transport and on-call duty allowances—from 3,000 rupees (\$US15) to 10,000 rupees—increased overtime rates, and improved promotion procedures.

The one-day strike was one of a series of provincial protests that began last November called by the Federation for Health Professionals (FHP). The FHP, an alliance of 15 trade unions, has declared that if its demands are not met before February 7, it will organise an indefinite national strike of health workers.

The participation of thousands of health workers in these strikes, demonstrations and rallies is another indication of the rising militancy of Sri Lankan workers and part of an upsurge of the international working class.

Last year hundreds of thousands of Sri Lankan workers were involved in strikes and demonstrations against the Rajapakse government's attacks on living and social conditions. The cost of all consumer goods is continuously rising and there are serious shortages of food and other essentials.

COVID-19 infections, hospitalisations and deaths are hitting new highs with the highly infectious Omicron variant allowed to sweep through the country under the government's criminal and profit-driven "Living with the virus" policies.

Like their union counterparts in other sectors, the FHP is desperately attempting to dissipate health employees' deep-going anger over stagnating salaries amid rising inflation, backbreaking work-loads and unsafe working conditions.

Thousands of health workers have been involved in about 30 strikes and demonstrations in the past 12 months, with the unions repeating the same demands and then postponing or

outright betraying these actions.

Confronted with the determination of health workers to fight, the FHP is claiming that last year's 100-day national online teachers' strike is a "model," which showed that increased pressure can force the government to grant union demands.

FHP chairman Ravi Kumudesh told the media, "It is clear to us from the recent teachers' and principals' strike that only by launching strikes and protests can the trade unions get a solution."

FHP leaders are lying through their teeth by claiming that teachers won their demands because of the unions' struggle. The teachers' unions held various protests on provincial and national level during the 100-day online strike in order to dissipate teachers' rising opposition. In fact, the teachers' fight for higher wages went on for two decades because their demands were refused by successive Sri Lankan governments and consistently betrayed by the unions.

In October, the teachers' unions again sold out their members, accepting a government "offer" of just one third of the salary increase originally demanded and then bogusly hailing it as a "victory." The unions also supported the immediate and dangerous reopening of schools, amid rising COVID-19 infections. Like all other unions, the FHP backed this treachery.

The lesson of the teachers' struggle is that without a political fight, independent of the unions, against government and its big business policies, the working class cannot defend its social rights. What was required is the unification of teachers with other sections of the working class, and their international class brothers and sisters, to carry out this fight on the basis of socialist policies.

The FHP leadership now declares that because teachers won a pitiful wage rise, the government has created a salary anomaly between educators and health employees, and it must rectify the salary differential and restore the "pride" of health professionals.

At the same time, FTP officials are telling members that health professionals, unlike teachers who, they claim, did not

work during the pandemic, continued their service and therefore deserve a salary increase. This is a filthy attempt to pit health workers against educators and block their class unity.

Addressing strikers outside the Ministry of Health on January 26, FTP leaders appealed to the authorities to hold discussions and “solve” health workers’ demands.

“Mr. Minister, don’t be afraid,” FHP chairman Kumudesh declared. “Get your spine straight and come to discuss with us... We know how to formulate solutions.”

This is nothing other than a message to the government: the unions will provide the means to suppress the opposition of health workers as long as you sit down and talk to us. Last year, FHP officials met with the minister and the ministry officials and on the basis of some empty promises, shut down industrial action.

Health employees have consistently called for COVID-19 safety measures and an expansion of the health service to treat patients. While the health unions were previously compelled to adopt these demands, they have now completely dropped them. All Sri Lankan unions, including those in the health sector, have embraced the government’s profit-driven “living with the virus” policies.

The cash-strapped Rajapakse government is not prepared to grant any of the demands of any section of the working class. Confronting economic collapse and teetering at the brink of default, the Rajapakse government’s priority is squeezing workers and the poor in order to fulfill their obligations to international bankers and big business. Despite the catastrophic health emergency produced by COVID-19, the government slashed health expenditure by 28 billion rupees for 2021 and by 6 billion for this year.

The repeated strikes and protests by health sector workers demonstrate that the working class will not accept the government’s attacks and is determined to defend their living conditions and social rights. In order to develop this fight, however, they need a political program.

The Health Workers’ Action Committee (HWAC), the rank-and-file organisation initiated by the Socialist Equality Party and independent of the trade unions, is continuously intervening among health workers to fight for such a program.

Last week the HWAC issued a statement entitled “Provincial agitations of the health professionals and the path to be taken by the health workers,” which stated:

“While the Health Workers’ Action Committee admires the determination of the workers to fight the government attacks, it emphasises that militancy alone is not enough...

“The unions do everything in their command to make workers believe that problems can be solved by sitting with the government around a negotiating table. This is how trade

unions blocked last year’s health sector struggles developing into a united offensive for their demands and directly assisted the government.

“Health employees must reject this retrogressive role of the trade unions, dividing them across grades, and unite with all workers across the country and their international class brothers and sisters.”

Calling for expanding HWAC and building action committees in every health institution, the statement said last year’s struggles showed that without a political fight against the government’s policies, and against capitalism, workers could not defend their rights.

The only way forward, the statement continued, is the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government to reorganise the economy on the basis of socialist and internationalist policies, and urged health workers to support the Global Workers’ Inquest into the Pandemic launched by the *World Socialist Web Site*.

HWAC members and supporters spoke with striking health workers at several hospitals.

Highlighting the treachery of the unions, a laboratory technician from Gampola hospital said, “The trade unions are vehemently deceiving the workers. Even though trade unions are assuring us that the struggle is being launched to win our demands, they have dumped the real issues and bring forward their reactionary goals and deceive us.”

An interim health officer at Kandy National Hospital pointed out that the unions were trying to create antagonisms between different sections of the working class. “They are helping the government through this by pitting one section of the working class against another. Their objective is to block all avenues for workers to get together in a common struggle.”



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