

Mobilise the working class to support Sri Lankan national health strike

Health Workers Action Committee (Sri Lanka)
10 February 2022

The Health Workers Action Committee (HWAC) urges all health workers in Sri Lanka to join the ongoing indefinite national strike action by a major section of their colleagues. We also appeal to all workers, in both state and private sectors, to provide their full support to this struggle, as the focal point of a fightback by the entire working class.

More than 65,000 health workers, including nurses, paramedics, public health inspectors, medical laboratory technologists and pharmacists, began the strike on Monday. Cancer, maternity and children's emergency services, along with the main COVID-19 treatment institutions and the Central Blood Bank, are not involved in the walkout at this stage.

The strike was called by the Federation of Health Professionals (FHP), an alliance of 15 unions. On Tuesday, over 3,000 health workers rallied outside the health ministry in central Colombo. They came from across the island.

The FHP, which has betrayed previous action by health workers during the past two years, was forced to call this week's walkout in response to rising anger over the government's repeated refusal to address our urgent demands. These include 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 health sector has been pushed to breaking point by the surge of COVID-19 infected patients into the overburdened hospitals. Health workers are desperately struggling to deal with the emergency in an inadequate health infrastructure that has been systematically rundown by successive Sri Lankan governments.

The health workers' walkout is part of a growing wave of working-class struggles in Sri Lanka and internationally against attacks on basic social rights and the catastrophe created by the criminal "live with the

virus" policies of the ruling elites, which prioritise profits over human lives.

The pro-government Public Services United Nurses' Union (PSUNU) and the All Ceylon Health Service Union (ACHSU), which is controlled by the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), are scabbing on the strike. We appeal to all members of these unions to reject this betrayal and join their colleagues.

PSUNU leader Muruththettuwe Ananda, a Buddhist monk, viciously branded the strike as "sabotage action" and demanded the health ministry secretary penalise the "saboteurs." The ACHSU cynically declared that it would not participate in the walkout because it was not a "joint action." These unions are directly siding with, and strengthening, the Rajapakse government.

At the same time, we warn striking health workers that the FHP will attempt to shut down their strike at the first opportunity. Straight after Tuesday's demonstration, FHP leaders rushed into a discussion with Health Minister Keheliya Rambukwella and senior ministry officials. Rambukwella made an empty promise that a cabinet paper could be presented for an overtime payment increase but said nothing about health workers' other demands.

FHP chairman Ravi Kumudesh later told the media: "We ask the health minister to please tell us what decision you are going to take to the cabinet. If the minister tells us tomorrow, or the day after, that this is the solution that he is going to submit to the cabinet, then we can halt the strike until the cabinet decision is made."

On Monday, Kumudesh blamed the health minister and officials for not being "brave" enough to take decisions like their predecessors, who, he said, had solved health employees' problems. This claim is a lie. Nothing has ever been won by health workers, or any other section of workers, without a bitter struggle against the government of the day.

In the same breath, Kumudesh appealed to President Rajapakse and Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse to speak with the unions, as if they somehow had a different position to the health minister and could provide a solution. This is bogus. President Rajapakse, his government, and the entire capitalist class, face a profound economic crisis, a predicament dramatically worsened by the pandemic.

Colombo is organising more foreign loans, in the form of swapping arrangements, in an attempt to repay massive debts to international institutions. It has no dollars to pay for the release of thousands of containers filled with essential goods and now stuck in the port.

On Monday, the finance ministry issued a circular to all government institutions calling on them to reduce expenditure, including on basic items such as telephone and electricity. The government is also printing money to fill the revenue gap. This is fuelling inflation and drastically reducing the real incomes of workers, farmers and other self-employed.

Last month the finance ministry wrote to the International Monetary Fund, seeking its so-called technical assistance. This is a signal that more austerity measures are being prepared and that all sections of the working class will face even deeper social attacks.

Fully conscious of these facts, the FHP is desperately promoting illusions that health workers can win their demands by applying more pressure to the government!

On Tuesday, Kumudesh referred to the teachers' struggle and falsely insisted that teachers won their demands through more protests. This is another patent lie.

The education unions organised one protest after another during last year's 100-day online teachers' strike and then betrayed their members, accepting a government-proposed paltry wage increase—equal to just one third of the original pay demand—and agreeing to the dangerous reopening of schools as the coronavirus pandemic worsened. This betrayal was endorsed by all the health unions.

All workers who have come into struggle over the past 12 months—in health, education, government administration, railway, electricity, ports, petroleum, plantations, just to mention a few—have experienced the same betrayals. Without politically defeating the government and big business attacks, the working class cannot defend its social and democratic rights.

The unions, which are bound to capitalist rule and the nation state, fear any confrontation with the government, and have done everything they can to block such a

struggle. This has emboldened the Rajapakse regime and the ruling elite, which are discussing dictatorial measures to confront the rising mass anger. Justice Minister Ali Sabry has publicly proposed to illegalise strikes and protests.

Health workers must reject the FHP's illusion-mongering, and its bankrupt appeals to the Rajapakse government, and take the struggle for decent wages, working conditions, democratic rights and coronavirus-safe working into their own hands.

Action committees must be built in every health institution with democratically elected representatives, independent of the trade unions and its bureaucrats.

They must demand billions of rupees to overhaul and modernise the deteriorating health service, recruit more health employees and grant the required pay and working conditions in full. Action committees must reject the unions' attempts to divide workers on the basis of grades and fight for the unity of all health workers and the working class as a whole.

The HWAC emphasises that the fight to achieve these demands involves a political struggle against the capitalist profit system and for the reorganisation of the economy in the interests of the majority, not the wealthy few. This means the fight for a workers' and peasants' government based on socialist policies.

Health workers have been in the forefront of struggles around the globe, including in the US, Europe, the UK and India, throughout the pandemic. Next week, on February 15, nurses in New South Wales, Australia, will walk out. Striking Sri Lankan health workers must join hands with their brothers and sisters around the world. This is the perspective that guides the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

The HWAC, which was formed in 2020 on the initiative of the Socialist Equality Party, is made up of nurses, doctors and other ancillary workers from across several health institutions. We are fighting to establish action committees in all health workplaces. Please contact us for assistance in this struggle.



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