

Sri Lankan nurses defy court ban and remain on indefinite strike with other health workers

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On Thursday evening, Colombo district courts issued an enjoining order against Government Nursing Officers' Association (GNOA) President Saman Rathnapriya, directing him to immediately "suspend" the union's involvement in ongoing indefinite strike action by tens of thousands of health workers. The judiciary will issue its final decision on the order on February 24 and has told Rathnapriya to appear in court on that day.

The GNOA, which has about 20,000 members, is one of 18 unions involved in the Federation of Health Professionals' national strike that began on Monday. Over 65,000 health workers, including nurses, paramedic services, public health inspectors, medical laboratory technologists and pharmacists, are on strike.

The Federation of Health Professionals (FHP) was compelled to call the action amid the growing opposition of its members over low wages and deteriorating conditions. The strikers are demanding 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.

Although the courts have singled out the nurses, the strike ban is aimed at breaking the industrial action of all health employees. Health workers, however, are defying the court order, making clear their determination to win their long outstanding demands.

Yesterday thousands of health workers demonstrated in the Anuradhapura, Hambantota and Nuwara Eliya districts. Similar numbers protested on Thursday in the Kurunegala, Matara, Badulla, Vavuniya and Ampara districts.

The request for a strike suspension order was made by the Sri Lankan Attorney General (AG). State lawyers appearing for the AG told the courts that

"patient care has been gravely affected by the strike."

The AG's intervention would not have occurred without a directive from the highest levels of the government. It followed President Gotabaya Rajapakse's condemnation of the strike at a public rally of his Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) party in Anuradhapura on Wednesday.

Rajapakse declared that public servants were resorting to strikes under "the influence of various political forces," adding: "Public officials have a responsibility to serve the people and the country."

Rajapakse's concerns about "the people" are bogus. His government have ended public health measures to suppress COVID-19 and are attempting to condition the population to mass infections and deaths. It is determined to impose the burden of crisis worsened by the COVID-19 global pandemic on workers and the poor.

Colombo is desperate to suppress the industrial action by health employees, fearing it will encourage other sections of the working class to fight the government's social attacks. Last year strikes and struggles erupted across the island involving health, education, government administration, railway, electricity, ports, petroleum and plantations workers. Yesterday around 26,000 university non-academic workers held a national one-day protest to demand a salary increase.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) condemns the government's attack on the health workers' right to strike and other industrial action. We urge the entire working class to oppose the government's repressive legal moves and mobilise to defend all health employees. At stake is the basic democratic right of all workers to defend their living and social conditions.

The pro-government Public Services Nurses Union (PSNU), and the All Ceylon Health Services Union

(ACHSU), which is controlled by the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, are scabbing on the strike. This has strengthened the government's hand and opened the way for its repressive measures. Many PSNU and ACHSU members, however, have begun to join the industrial action in recent days and condemned their unions' strike-breaking.

Last year, the FHP held 10 limited strikes over the current demands. These struggles were shut down and betrayed by the union body, following empty promises by President Rajapakse and his health minister.

While health workers remain on strike, the FHP are marking time waiting to abandon the strike after the court order. Yesterday morning the GNOA rhetorically declared on Facebook: "Despite bringing not one enjoining order but 10 of such, the more than 65,000 officers in this coalition will continue this struggle."

Yesterday evening, Rathnapriya told the media that the union's executive committee would "convene a meeting immediately after receiving the enjoining order and discuss the future course of action." FHP President Ravi Kumudesh said, "We are not aware of an issuance of any orders. In case there are any, we will seek legal advice regarding such."

The FHP has no intention of turning to other sections of the working class to defend the democratic rights of their members and taking up a political struggle against the government's latest assault. Tied to the nation state, all the unions fear that a mobilisation of workers would produce a direct confrontation with the government and the capitalist class.

This week, the FHP President Kumudesh publicly appealed to Health Minister Keheliya Rambukwella to make a "promise" on union's demands and enabling the union alliance to call off the strike.

Significantly, not a single union in Sri Lanka condemned the attack on health workers or has come to their defence. Strengthened by this silence, the government stepped up its attack.

Yesterday Health Minister Rambukwella denounced the strikers, declaring that "unionists are in the habit of dismissing well-founded reasons and discussions for a sharply constructed and manipulative political agenda."

Minister for Ports and Shipping Affairs Rohitha Abeywardhana attacked the striking health workers in parliament, declaring: "There should be laws curbing strikes in sectors related to essential services. People

are dying without medicine." He urged Justice Minister Ali Sabry to introduce anti-strike laws. Last month Sabry called on President Rajapakse to ban strikes in key institutions.

The media is backing the government threats, churning out vicious propaganda against strikers with stories about a man and a child who died because they were unable to get medical attention and photographs of suffering patients.

A hysterical editorial in *Divaina*, a Sinhala daily, cited ruling party MP Tissa Kuttiarachchi, who said strikers should be attacked with clubs. "This country is facing a multiple crisis... We oppose strikes which are sabotaging the essential services of the public... Health workers are digging graves of people. If the people get provoked health workers would be thrown into the same graves," the newspaper declared.

Workers must condemn the filthy propaganda of these media outlets who fully support the Rajapakse government's "let it rip" coronavirus policies, putting profit before human lives, undermining public health measures, reopening the economy, and normalising pandemic deaths.

The court ban on health workers' industrial action indicates that Rajapakse regime is moving into direct confrontation with the entire working class. Facing a desperate economic crisis, the government, like its counterparts around the world, cannot tolerate any action by the working class.

Once again, it sharply poses the necessity for the independent mobilisation of political and industrial strength of the working class to defeat the Rajapakse government and its big business policies.

Workers must build action committees in every workplace, independent of the trade unions and forge their unity with working class across Sri Lanka and internationally. This struggle must be based on fight for socialist policies. Workers, students and youth should join the Socialist Equality Party and fight for this program.



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