

Sri Lankan president imposes essential services strike ban on health and power workers

K. Ratnayake
14 February 2022

Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapakse issued an extraordinary gazette on Friday night declaring health and electricity supplies as essential services and banning workers striking in these industries.

The immediate purpose of the Essential Public Services Act (EPSA) proclamation is to suppress an ongoing indefinite strike by more than 65,000 health workers including nurses, paramedic services, public health inspectors, medical laboratory technologists and pharmacists. The national walkout began last Monday and was called by the Federation of Health Professionals (FHP), an alliance of 18 unions.

It is also aimed against the Ceylon Electricity Board's 26,000-strong workforce who are opposing government moves to privatise the sector. Colombo has decided to sell a 40 percent stake in the state-owned Kerawalapitiya Power Station to the US-based New Fortress Energy Company.

The president's declaration came as nurses defied a court injunction over their involvement in the national health workers' strike. On Thursday, the Colombo District Court issued an order on Government Nursing Officers Association (GNOA) leader Saman Rathnapriya directing him to immediately "suspend" the union's participation. Thousands of nurses, however, defied the order and in different parts of the country continued their industrial action on Friday and Saturday with their colleagues.

Rajapakse's proclamation said that health and electricity were "essential to the life of the community" and "likely to be impeded or interrupted." He specifically targeted nurses, stating, "All service, work or labour, of any description whatsoever, necessary or required to be done in connection with the maintenance, and the reception, care feeding, and treatment, of patients in hospitals, nursing homes, dispensaries, and other similar institution." The vague wording, of course, allows it to be used against other striking health workers.

Under the EPSA laws, any employee of these designated

institutions who does not attend work faces "conviction, after summary trial before a Magistrate" and "liable to rigorous imprisonment" of two to five years and/or a fine of between 2,000 and 5,000 rupees (\$US11-\$US25) or both. The "movable and immoveable property" of those convicted can be seized by the state and his or her name be "removed from any register maintained for profession or vocation."

It is also an offence for any person to "incite, induce or encourage any other person" to not attend work through a "physical act or by any speech or writing." In effect those who defend the democratic rights of targeted workers can be similarly punished.

Last May, the Rajapakse government used the EPSA to break a development officers' strike. In June, the law was extended to cover key state institutions, including health, ports, electricity, petroleum, postal, banks and some state administration offices in response to strikes and protests in those sectors.

While the law was extended for several months, the government did not immediately impose it, fearing a backlash from workers. With the assistance of trade unions which betrayed these struggles, the government allowed the proclamation to lapse. None of the trade unions, including those in the health services, demanded this repressive law be withdrawn.

Rajapakse's latest proclamation is not to provide essential services to the masses but to suppress workers' legitimate demand for decent wages and working conditions amid the country's deepening economic crisis that has been sharply worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Like the ruling classes internationally, the Rajapakse government has responded to COVID-19 by prioritising big business profits over human lives. With Omicron now sweeping Sri Lanka, the government is undermining or removing public health measures necessary to prevent the highly infectious variant spreading. Testing and tracing has been reduced to a minimum and those found infected are

directed to “home quarantine.”

The pandemic has created a desperate economic crisis for Sri Lankan capitalism. The country is on the verge of foreign debt default and facing deepening social unrest with many people going hungry because of widespread shortages of essentials. A measure of this crisis is indicated by Finance Minister Basil Rajapakse’s scheduled visit to India in the next fortnight to sign a \$1 billion loan deal for the immediate import of food and medicines from that country.

The Rajapakse government is determined to impose the burden of this economic crisis on the masses. Yesterday, Health Minister Keheliya Rambukwella told a function that health workers’ demands could not be granted and ruled out any negotiation with the unions.

The Rajapakse regime has been rattled by the defiance of health workers and their ongoing action. On Thursday non-academic staff walked out over wages and conditions and the following day, hundreds of private sector workers protested in different parts of the island against government moves to impose a value added tax on employees’ provident (pension) funds.

While the nurses and other health workers have demonstrated their determination to fight, the GNOA leadership responded to the court injunction and Rajapakse’s EPSA dictates by announcing on Saturday that the union was immediately withdrawing from the strike.

GNOA President Saman Rathnapriya declared that his union “respects the judiciary” and the union would rejoin the struggle as soon as the court injunction was withdrawn. Yesterday, he said the union would challenge the EPSA in the “international courts.”

FHP leader Ravi Kumudesh told another press conference that other health unions would remain on strike but insisted that the government could resolve the health unions’ demands in discussions.

Public Health Inspectors Union leader Upul Rohana declared that if these problems could not be solved within Sri Lanka, the unions would go to the “international,” meaning the UN Human Rights Council and the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

Since the outset of health workers’ strike and protests last year, the FHP and its respective unions have peddled the political fantasy that Colombo can be pressured into granting workers’ demands. These claims are false to the core and designed to disarm and politically trap workers in the face of the government’s escalating attacks.

The unions’ insistence that they will defend the right to strike by going to the “international”—i.e., human rights organisations and the ILO—is more illusion-mongering. These international institutions serve the interests of the financial oligarchy and are utterly hostile to the international

working class. Health and power workers can only defend their democratic rights by turning to the working class in Sri Lanka and internationally.

The unions are virulently opposed to this perspective and are desperately working behind the scenes to shut down the health workers’ strike. The pro-government Public Services Nurses Union and the All-Ceylon Health Employees Union, which is controlled by the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, opposed the strike action and remained on the job. Not a single Sri Lankan trade union has denounced President Rajapakse’s use of the essential services laws against health workers.

In class solidarity with the Rajapakse government, the opposition parliamentary parties, including the United National Party, Samagi Jana Balawegaya, the JVP and the Tamil National Alliance, have said nothing about the government action. Whether in or out of government, these parties have either used EPSA measures against workers or supported their implementation.

The Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka demands the immediate withdrawal of the draconian EPSA laws and urges the working class to immediately mobilise its industrial and political strength to defend all health employees and defeat the government’s anti-democratic assaults.

The Rajapakse government’s latest attack, and the trade unions’ cowardly capitulation to it, highlights the urgency and necessity of workers organising independently to defend their democratic and social rights. This requires the building of action committees independent of the entire trade union apparatus, to fight for a unified struggle of the entire working class and in alliance with the international class brothers and sisters on a socialist program.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact