

Sri Lanka unions betray health workers' indefinite strike

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Yesterday, the Federation of Health Professionals (FHP), an alliance of 18 Sri Lankan unions, shut down the indefinite national strike action by over 65,000 health employees without achieving any of its long-standing demands.

Nurses, paramedics, public health inspectors, medical laboratory technologists and pharmacists walked out across the country on February 7. Their demands included 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 FHP announced the betrayal on Tuesday with its president, Ravi Kumudesh, declaring that union members would return to work on Wednesday. He claimed the strike shutdown was “temporary,” blamed Health Minister Keheliya Rambukwella for not acting “genuinely,” and issued a pathetic appeal to President Rajapakse to “intervene” in the dispute.

In a desperate and cynical attempt to deflect the anger of health workers over the betrayal, Kumudesh declared FHP members would resume strike action “at any point, if the president fails to provide us with concrete solutions to our grievances.”

This is ludicrous. Last Saturday, Rajapakse proclaimed the health sector an essential service under the repressive essential public services act (ESPA). Any health worker who violates ESPA regulations can be punished with rigorous jail terms and fines. Those who campaign for their democratic rights face similar punishments.

Last Thursday, the Sri Lankan attorney general, prompted by the government, obtained a court injunction order directing the Government Nursing Officers Association (GNOA) to immediately “suspend” its participation in the strike. GNOA leader Saman Rathnapriya bowed to the court directive and quickly announced the withdrawal of his union from the strike.

FHP leaders said nothing about these repressive actions in their appeal to the president but claimed that health workers' problems could be solved in a few hours of discussion.

Kumudesh told media that his members are “professionals” and “know the financial hardship the country is going through,” which was why the unions are “not pushing for money at present.” Any settlement would only be in “principle,” he said. In other words, the FHP, like every other union, will do whatever is necessary to make the working class pay for the crisis of Sri Lankan capitalism.

The FHP's shutdown of the strike was in direct opposition to health workers' determination to fight. Defying Rajapakse's repressive essential service decree and the court injunction against the GNOA, FHP members remained on strike until Tuesday, with around 5,000 demonstrating in central Colombo outside the presidential secretariat on Monday.

The government repression and threats have been accompanied by a barrage of hostile media attacks on the strikers. The media reported that at Monday's cabinet meeting Internal Security Minister Sarath Weerasekara urged the president to move against the strikers. Rajapakse reportedly told him that “the people would take on the agitators.” While no other details were provided, MPs from Rajapakse's ruling party have been publicly campaigning for goon attacks on the striking health workers.

On Monday, Health Minister Rambukwella told the Derana television talk show that the government had “strategically used the law courts” against the strike and that he had managed to “convince” the trade union leaders during discussions to stop the strike, without him agreeing to any major demand.

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

Health Services Union (ACHSU), controlled by the opposition JVP, have strengthened the government's hand. Many of their union members, however, opposed the union leaders and joined the strike.

From the outset, the FHP leadership have done their utmost to prevent a confrontation with the government, calling 10 limited strikes last year over the same demands and issuing the usual lame appeals to the government. The FHP claimed that this month's indefinite strike, which was in response to the rising anger of its members, would pressure the government and force it grant health workers' demands.

Last week's court injunction and the repressive essential service decree makes clear the urgent necessity for the working class to conduct a unified political fight against the government and the crisis-ridden capitalist system. Improvements in the working conditions and wages of health employees, and the working class as whole, as well as the defence of democratic rights, including the right to strike, cannot be won without preparing such a struggle.

The global surge of COVID-19 has crippled the Sri Lankan economy and seen the cash-strapped government use every means to try and impose the burden of the crisis on the back of the working people. Like every government globally, the Colombo regime has embraced the criminal, profit-driven "live with the virus" policies.

The FHP's shutdown of the health workers national strike is a crucial experience, not just for health employees but the entire working class. It follows the teachers unions' betrayal of the 100-day national online teaching strike.

Not a single Sri Lankan trade union has expressed its solidarity with the health workers strike nor come to its defence. All of them are maintaining a deathly silence over the government's repressive essential service decree.

Once again, the health workers' strike demonstrates that militancy and determination alone are inadequate. Workers need to seriously turn to build their own independent organisations—workplace action committees—to take the struggle into their own hands.

As the Health Workers Action Committee February 10 statement titled "Mobilise the working class to support Sri Lankan national health strike" declared: "Action committees must be built in every health institution with democratically elected representatives, independent of the trade unions and their bureaucrats."

The statement also emphasised that there is no national solution to the crisis of Sri Lankan or global capitalism

and that workers must fight for an international socialist program, uniting with their international class brothers and sisters, against pandemic, war and social inequality.

Several health workers spoke with the WSWs this week, angrily denouncing the FHP betrayal.

A nurse from Badulla Hospital said: "[President Rajapakse] gave promises but nothing was implemented. This time also the unions are only demanding a promise. It's clear that we can't do it through the isolated struggles of trade unions to defeat these repressive laws. We need a broad alliance of working people."

A male nurse from Kandy Hospital said workers needed a unified struggle. "Scabbing trade unions, such as JVP, were exposed. Rising inflation means we must demand a high wage increase as well as compensation for inflation, otherwise there's no point to a wage demand. The trade unions are dividing the workers rather than uniting them. In contrast, we have to unite with all sections of workers and all grades in the health sector in order fight draconian laws like essential services measures."

A Gampola Hospital nurse said, "The rich have a good time, even during the pandemic, and the poor suffer a lot. The cost of living is rising and aggravating our situation day by day. Our wages are stagnating that's why workers are furious and why health workers enthusiastically participated in the strike. All workers, irrespective of the grades and sectors, are in the same boat... The capitalist class is always winning but we cannot allow this. The trade unions do not speak for us."

A psychiatric ward nurse from Kandy Hospital commented: "The role being played by the trade unions is disgusting. If they called for a vote, an absolute majority of nurses would have voted to continue the struggle. Workers all face the same questions, such as the cost of living, but the burning issue is a unified struggle, which the trade unions totally opposed. The government benefits from that."



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