The way forward for the Sri Lankan health workers' struggle

Health Workers Action Committee
1 March 2022

Today, around 50,000 Sri Lankan health workers are beginning a two-day strike to press for their long-standing demands for higher wages and improved working conditions. Like successive regimes in the past, the government of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse has rejected any improvement.

The health workers' demands include 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.

This strike was called by the Federation of Health Professionals (FHP), an alliance of 18 trade unions in the health sector, covering nurses, paramedics, public health inspectors, medical laboratory technologists and pharmacists.

On February 7, more than 65,000 health employees launched an indefinite strike for the same demands. Tens of thousands of nurses also participated in that action, but are now legally barred from joining the current stoppage.

In an attempt to break up the indefinite strike, the government unleashed repression. At the request of the attorney-general, the Colombo district court issued an enjoining order on the Government Nursing Officers Association (GNOA), barring its members from participating in the strike. President Rajapakse invoked the Essential Public Services Act (ESPA), criminalising health sector strikes.

Bowing to the government's attacks, the FHP betrayed the workers, ending the strike in nine days without achieving any of the demands.

FHP leader Ravi Kumudesh claimed it stopped the strike to give the government two weeks to address the issues. He appealed to Rajapakse to intervene and provide a solution. This flimsy justification for stopping the strike proved to be a cruel illusion.

Facing growing anger among members over the continuous rejection of their demands, the FHP has been compelled to call stoppages again. At a press conference on February 24, Kumudesh appealed to the health minister to establish a "technical committee" to discuss the salary anomalies. He said the union alliance was ready to "objectively, technically and theoretically" explain its position in such a committee.

Yesterday, Kumudesh warned: "The federation will go for an indefinite strike from March 10 if the ministry fails to reach a settlement in three days."

In other words, the FHP is demanding a "technical committee" to discuss the demands, not to grant them! Sri Lankan regimes, including Rajapakse governments, have used such committees and commissions to undermine workers' struggles. The FHP is ready to collaborate in such a manoeuvre.

The Health Workers Action Committee (HWAC) urges our brothers and sisters to reject this cynical ploy by the FHP. Health employees, like other workers who are coming into struggle to defend living conditions, need decent wage increases, improved working conditions and workplace safety, including from the dangerous COVID-19 pandemic.

For its part, the government, far from being ready to grant workers' demands, is continuing to intensify its repressive measures. Last week, Rajapakse extended his EPSA declaration for a further 10 days. This can be used to sack workers for "violating" its regulations and subject them to severe jail terms and fines.

Last Friday, the Colombo district court extended the enjoining order on the GNOA until March 11, barring its members from joining the strike action. The GNOA has a membership of around 20,000 nurses. Its leader, Saman Rathnapriya, said union members would only participate in demonstrations during the current stoppage.

Addressing a public meeting on Saturday, Rajapakse made threatening remarks against strikers. He said he did

© World Socialist Web Site

not expect any responsible party to carry out disruptive strikes and false propaganda. He demanded that "the opposition, the people, and the government must work together to overcome the present challenges."

The government has been engulfed in unprecedented economic turmoil, exacerbated by the global coronavirus pandemic. Far from addressing demands for wage increases or improved living conditions for workers and the poor, it is implementing austerity measures to impose the burden of the crisis on the backs of people.

The country is on the edge of a debt default, without sufficient foreign exchange for essential purposes. It has no dollars to pay for oil, which is used for thermal power generation, so the population is suffering lengthy power cuts and transport has begun to grind to a halt. The price of essentials is increasing daily and shortages are rampant.

Now the Ukrainian war crisis provoked by the US and European powers, and triggered by the Russian invasion, is threatening a wider conflict that will further deepen the economic crisis in every country.

Without defeating the government and its big business policies to make the working people pay for the crisis, the working class cannot stop the assault being unleashed by the government.

The trade unions are collaborating with the government against the health workers. Not a single union has issued a statement condemning the court orders against the nurses and the essential service decree banning strikes. The unions are in fact busy suppressing the struggles of their members.

The pro-government Public Services Nurses Union and the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna-controlled All Ceylon Health Employees Union scabbed on the February 7 strike and are doing the same in the current stoppage.

Several of our colleagues explained their attitude on the government and the unions. A nurse from Peradeniya Children's Hospital expressed her disgust over the betrayal of the health workers' strike by the FHP and the scabbing by other nurses' unions. "I am supporting the HWAC because I oppose trade unions' activities to divide nurses and health workers. I trust health workers will learn from the betrayal of the trade unions of this struggle," she said.

A nurse from Gampola hospital denounced the government for shedding crocodile tears about sick people only when health workers strike. "We, the nurses must break from the isolation created by the unions and turn to joining other workers for a united struggle. I am calling for a collective fight against this repressive government."

A radiographer from Kandy hospital said: "The FHP leaders shut down the strike without even informing the members like us. Now they have called this token strike to divert the workers' disgust toward them. Can anyone believe this token strike will win our demands after the betrayal of the indefinite strike? The FHP is deliberately discouraging the fighting spirit of the workers."

At the beginning of the indefinite strike the HWAC warned about the attacks of the Rajapakse regime and role of the unions. We also elaborated a program for workers to fight. In our statement "*Mobilise the working class to support Sri Lankan national health strike*," we said:

"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."

Our statement also urged the Sri Lankan health workers to turn to the international working class and join the International Workers Alliance of Rank and File Committees. Health workers in the US, Turkey, Australia and New Zealand are in the forefront of similar struggles.

It is urgent to fight for the program initiated by the Socialist Equality Party. We urge you to join us and build action committees.

HWAC contact telephone number: 0773562327
Email: healthworkers-sl@wsws.org

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site