

Sri Lanka: Protesting health workers in Colombo expose deplorable conditions facing patients and staff

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Tens of thousands of health workers participated in the recent anti-government protests across Sri Lanka. Like millions of other workers, they were incensed by the dire shortages of fuel, gas and other essentials, as well as the daily power cuts.

Doctors, nurses and health workers in hospitals across the country face dire shortages of essential medicines. In June, the Sri Lankan ministry of health admitted that there was a shortage of 14 essential medicines and 185 other types of medicine. Health employees also confront extreme difficulties getting to work due to the breakdown of the public transport system and not being able to fuel their vehicles.

Health workers from the National Hospital in Sri Lanka (NHSL) and nearby medical facilities—the Lady Ridgeway Children’s Hospital, the De Soyza Maternity Hospital and the Eye Hospital—played a significant role in the mass anti-government protests.

When Rajapakse government-led thugs attacked protesters at Galle Face Green in May, thousands of health workers from these hospitals, along with port, railway and postal workers, walked out in protest and rushed to defend the protesters.

On July 7, hundreds of health workers marched to the ministry of health and on July 9 thousands participated in the mass uprising that forced President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to flee the country. Over the last three months, these hospital workers have treated dozens of protesters who were violently attacked by right-wing thugs, the military and the police.

Brought to power via a parliamentary conspiracy, the Ranil Wickremesinghe regime is incapable of resolving any of the desperate needs of the people. In fact, the problems confronting the toiling masses have intensified because of the International Monetary Fund austerity demands being implemented by the Wickremesinghe government.

The “let it rip” coronavirus policies maintained by the

Wickremesinghe government, and its predecessor, has resulted in another wave of COVID-19 infections and deaths, worsening the already difficult situation facing hospital workers.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with Colombo health workers during recent protests. They explained the dangerous and disastrous situations in their workplaces.

A senior nurse from the NHSL Endoscopy Unit said:

“We are protesting because our wages have been severely eroded by the high prices of goods and because we don’t have the necessary medication to treat patients. Some medicines are not available in the hospital or in private pharmacies.

“Those who need endoscopy procedures are unable to have them because our equipment is not being repaired and returned to us. We are working with all these terrible issues.

“I travel about 96 kilometres by train to get to work. I also cycle 4 kilometres, before and after the train trip, because I can’t get fuel for my motorbike. The train services have also been massively cut back, so things are going from bad to worse. We all need to start very early to get to work and get home several hours later than we used to. How are we supposed to fulfill the requirements of the people under these conditions?”

Asked to comment on the unions not wanting to organise another general strike, following the previous two general strikes which crippled the Rajapakse government, he said: “Some trade unions are supportive of the government and are working to sabotage any struggle. The vast majority of people, however, are against this government.”

WSWS reporters explained that the Socialist Equality Party was building action committees to organise workers independently of the unions in the fight for a workers’ and farmers’ government and socialist policies to address the crucial problems facing workers and the oppressed masses.

“Certainly we need such a fight,” the senior nurse said. “Everything in this society is broken down and there should

be a system that can meet the needs of the workers and oppressed people. They are becoming more and more oppressed. Those who have money can still afford the essentials, but most people are struggling to even have one meal a day. A packet of rice and curry has gone up to 380 rupees, but our salaries have not been increased. I cannot imagine how families with children survive in this situation.”

A senior pharmacist said: “We don’t have quite a lot of medicines, including some critical ones, and don’t have enough antibiotics. We are managing with great difficulties thanks to some of the donations we are now receiving, but people have to purchase some medicines from outside pharmacies by themselves.”

Two NHSL nurses described the daily problems they confront. “We live in hospital quarters but colleagues who come to work from distant areas face real difficulties. The cost of living is unbearable. We have to pay for accommodation, food and other requirements, and also need to send money to upkeep our families. Our meagre salaries are not enough to do all these tasks,” one of the nurses said.

The other nurse explained that they used to have around 80 casualty admissions per day before this crisis, but that these admissions had dropped to around 40. “I think people are not being treated because they’re unable to get to the hospital because of the fuel shortages. They’re probably doing home remedies which will lead to problems in the near future.

“We even have to ask patients to buy medicines and surgical equipment like urinary catheters, because we don’t have them in the surgical stores. And due to the lack of glucose strips we cannot check the blood sugar levels of diabetes patients. We should normally check their blood sugar levels three times a day but because of the very limited number of glucose strips we only use them in an emergency.

“There were days we didn’t even have paracetamol, which is totally unfair for the patients. We don’t normally use anti-rabies vaccines and anti-venom in our ward, but we’ve heard that there is a severe shortage of these lifesaving medicines.”

Asked what they thought about the SEP’s fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government, one nurse said:

“We are totally against this autocratic government. We don’t have a lot of knowledge about politics but we do know that all the wealth has been accumulated by a tiny layer while the vast majority of people are forced into destitution. We are for a system which can change this social injustice.” The other nurse agreed.

A consultant paediatrician from LRH said:

“We have a lot of problems because of the economic crisis in our country. Hospitals are very badly managed, running

with the least amount of facilities. At the same time, we have a problem with manpower—people are stuck in petrol and gas queues—so doctors and other staff are finding it difficult to get to work.”

Referring to the medicine shortages and the long-term impact on patients, she said: “We’re not getting many drugs from the ministry. Most of the drugs come from private donations, which the doctors themselves have to get from lots of foreign organisations.

“We’re finding it difficult to find some of the drugs and the cost has gone up drastically. What we were able to buy for 1,000 rupees four months ago now cost 5,000 rupees.

“We try to find at the very minimum the emergency drugs needed for the survival of the patient but drugs that are needed for the long term, for things like epilepsy and even insulin, we are now finding very difficult to get. What we have is only private donations but how long these will go on for, I don’t know. Everyone should be treated equally. Everybody has a right to survive.”

An NHSL health staff assistant said he was concerned about patient nutrition.

“We used to give a nutritious diet to our patients, but the nutritional value of the diet has been drastically cut. Most of the time there is no fish, meat or eggs and they just give them rice with a carrot curry or something like that. None of the special dietary milk supplements are available for patients,” he explained.

“We are not fighting only for our demands. We are here to highlight the fate of our patients too. Staff who are in nearby boarding houses face enormous difficulties buying food and other essentials.

“Our salary has been devalued immensely by the soaring prices. The gas cylinder, which we used to buy for 1,500 rupees, went up to 5,000 or 7,000 rupees and petrol which was around 137 rupees a litre has gone up to 470 rupees.

“We don’t have a decent life under this economic system and so people are rejecting their rule which has lasted 74 years [since independence]. People should be able to decide what kind of government they want to bring but there must be equality. People are prepared to sacrifice for a better future,” he said.



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