

Thousands of Sri Lankan health workers strike against austerity measures

Our reporters
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Public sector health workers across Sri Lanka joined a one-day strike Monday, demanding wage increases and an end to harsh austerity measures imposed by the government of President Ranil Wickremasinghe. The demands included wages or allowances indexed to the cost of living, a decrease in unfair interest hikes on loans and an end to recruiting from the multipurpose task force to the health service.

The bank interest rates for loans taken by workers have jumped from 8 percent to 15 percent over the past year, substantially increasing monthly installments deducted from wages. This comes under conditions where real wages have been almost halved due to rampant inflation.

The multipurpose task force was set up by previous government of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse to recruit unemployed youth to public sector jobs on lower wages and without the basic rights of workers recruited under general procedures.

Junior staff members at many hospitals, including the National Hospitals in Colombo and Kandy, and also in Jaffna, Kurunagala and Galle joined the strike. Health workers stopped work in defiance of essential services orders renewed on January 4 banning industrial action in several public sectors, including health.

The strike was the first this year and expressed the growing anger of workers over the deepening assault on their basic social and democratic rights by the government. It is implementing harsh austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in return for an emergency loan facility to address the country's acute economic crisis.

Last year a four-month long popular uprising from April to July forced the ousting of the Rajapakse government. The working class, including health workers, played a central role when millions took part in several one-day general strikes against the unbearable conditions created by soaring prices and acute shortages of basic goods.

Contrary to the intention of workers, the United Health Services Trade Union Alliance (UHSTUA), a group of 10 junior staff health workers' unions, called the strike not to mount a genuine struggle but to contain the widespread anger and opposition. The union declared it to be a sick-note campaign, told workers to stay at home and organized no meetings or protests in most places. This is in line with the politics of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), to which the UHSTUA is affiliated. The SLFP, one of the longstanding bourgeois parties, has a record of implementing IMF demands in the past and supports the current IMF agreement.

Wickremesinghe's budget for 2023 included major tax increases for workers, the slashing of price subsidies, huge state sector job cuts and privatisations. As a part of the privatisation of the health sector, the government proposed the introduction of paying wards in public hospitals.

Already the public health system is on the brink of collapse due to the COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis. Hospitals are short of medicines, medical equipment and staff. The budget for 2023 has allocated only 322 billion rupees for health while granting 539 billion rupees for defence and internal security.

The health workers strike is part of the resurgence of working class struggles in Sri Lanka and globally. On the same day, more than 7,000 workers in New York took part in an open-ended strike.

The conditions facing health workers are the same as those facing the whole working class in Sri Lanka. However, from the outset, the unions have refused to mobilise other sections of workers, even within the health sector such as doctors and nurses. The union failed to inform workers in several hospitals about the planned strike.

The unions organized a protest in front of the health ministry in Colombo but deliberately limited the numbers,

“to prevent clashes between police and workers” and “to avoid difficulties for the government.” At the protest, UHSTUA secretary Roy de Mel bluntly declared: “We didn’t choose wrong actions such as mobilising all workers into Colombo.”

Nearly 300 workers did participate in the protest for two hours from 10 a.m, displaying placards with their demands. A police battalion and water cannon were mobilised to intimidate workers.

During the protest, union leaders ran to the finance ministry for a discussion with officials. They then called off the protest, giving 14 days to the government to “resolve the issue” without any credible promises from the government. The strike continued for 24 hours.

Contrary to the claims of union leaders, the government will use the next 14 days, not to meet any of the demands of workers, but to prepare to suppress any further action. Under the Essential Services Act, any form of industrial action is a punishable criminal offence. The government also deployed the military to several hospitals in an attempt to break the strike.

The unions demand a stop to the recruitment of multipurpose task force members to pit health workers against another section of workers. Health workers should fight to secure decent wages and basic rights for those unemployed youth recruited to the service.

To fight for their basic rights, health workers need to establish rank-and-file action committees, independent of the trade unions and democratically controlled by workers themselves, in every hospital. They need to base themselves politically on a socialist perspective as their demands directly clash with the capitalist system which is determined to put the full burden of the economic crisis on workers. The action committees need to turn to other health workers and other workers in Sri Lanka and internationally in a common struggle for their social and democratic rights.

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The members of the Health Workers Action Committee (HWAC) discussed this perspective with hospital workers, distributing copies of its statement against paying wards. Health workers voiced their opposition to the actions of trade unions and spoke of the necessity to take their struggle forward.

A Colombo National Hospital worker spoke of the heavy workload in hospitals. “We face shortages of workers in the workplace. One worker has to do the work of two people, we are tired. When workers retire, we have

to cover the work of those workers as the government doesn’t hire new workers.”

He said the monthly wage is just 26,000 rupees which is not enough to buy food, at least for a week. “By increasing the interest on loans, our incomes go down.” he said. “One of the main reasons for this protest is to increase our salary. We cannot live on this salary.”

Another worker from the national hospital joined the discussion. He said after paying loans, only 5,000 rupees was left from the salary. “Now after increasing the interest rates of banks on the order of the government, another 3,000 rupees will be deducted. I can’t imagine how we can live amid increasing prices of essentials.”

Agreeing with the HWAC perspective, he said: “The rulers don’t listen. We are joining this protest, thinking that there will be justice here. But we don’t think that there will be justice here. We need our independent movement to take the struggle forward.”

The HWAC intervened among workers at the Dickoya district hospital in the plantation areas of central Sri Lanka. The workers said they did not even know about the strike because the trade unions had told them nothing.

Mohan, a hospital attendant, explained: “None of the trade unions informed us about today’s strike. We are facing a lot of problems with this present cost of living. It is very difficult to live. Our loan payments have increased. Now it is also difficult to get a loan.”

He opposed the actions of trade unions that isolate workers. “Attendants strike one day, nurses strike another day, doctors another day. But to win our demands all workers must unite and fight for their rights. Trade unions divide the workers. We need new leadership to unite workers.”

A junior staff member from the Balapitiya Teaching Hospital in the southern province told the WSWS: “Earlier trade unions used to inform us about strikes. But they not tell us about this strike. We didn’t know what was happening. We have many issues to protest about, including the lack of medicines, allowance cuts. But they [the unions] didn’t discuss any of these issues with workers.”



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