

Sri Lanka: Health Workers Action Committee holds meeting at Kandy General Hospital

Our reporters
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On June 24, the Health Workers Action Committee (HWAC) held an important meeting at the Kandy General Hospital (KGH) to oppose the Wickremesinghe government's privatisation of state-owned-enterprises (SOEs) and the associated introduction of paying wards at public hospitals.

The meeting was attended by about 15 health employees with several others joining online. While a significant number of health workers were eager to participate, they were unable to do so because of severe staff shortages at the hospital. Many health employees are forced to work overtime.

The meeting was chaired by a leading member of the HWAC at Kandy General Hospital. Welcoming workers, he said: "Having faced the danger of COVID-19, we now confront shortages of medicines and staff, salary cuts and the privatisation of public enterprises, including health. In this situation, we cannot achieve any success through the bankrupt policy being promoted by the trade unions who claim that it's possible to pressure the government to charge direction.

"The Wickremesinghe government's attacks flow from the systemic crisis of the global capitalist system. That is why workers need to build action committees to fight for their own solutions to these problems, that is, for a socialist program."

A video message from Socialist Equality Party (SEP) assistant secretary Saman Gunadasa was played at the meeting. Gunadasa said that the meeting was being held amid the government's sweeping privatisation program.

"As health workers, it's not necessary for me to explain the destruction carried out by the government. It sweeps through the lives of every worker and peasant and other oppressed masses," he said.

The principal purpose of all the government attacks on public health, he continued, "is to maintain the economy and secure maximum profits for the international corporations

and big business. Money is being spent to boost the military and police to crack down on workers and the oppressed masses demonstrating any sort of opposition to government policies. Enormous taxes have been put on the backs of the working people to maintain the capitalist economy."

Gunadasa drew out the historical and international context of the unfolding capitalist crisis. He explained how the COVID-19 pandemic and the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine had deepened the impact of the 2008 global financial crash.

The economic crisis in Sri Lanka, he continued, was an extreme manifestation of the international crisis of capitalism and had forced the Sri Lankan government to default on foreign debt payments in April 2022.

President Wickremesinghe's government, following the approval of a \$US3 billion bailout loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), is implementing savage austerity measures to put the full burden of the crisis onto the backs of workers and the oppressed masses, the speaker said.

"Workers, peasants and other masses are not responsible for this crisis but local and international capitalist investors who have amassed immense profits through their exploitation of labour," Gunadasa said.

"While this has created a hell for working people, the capitalist investors and banks in Sri Lanka are trying to further boost their profits even as workers' real wages are declining because of hyperinflation, and pension funds, like employees' provident funds, are under attack."

The trade unions, which act as industrial police for the government and big business, are incapable of providing a way forward for the working class, he continued, pointing out the need for workers to form their own action committees.

"Only through these committees, will workers be able to discuss the program required to meet their needs and build a network of action committees to establish unity with

workers in power, telecom, insurance, education, transport and other sectors. The ultimate aim of these networks is for workers to get power into their own hands,” Gunadasa concluded.

During the discussion period, a nurse asked about how workers would organise their struggles and how the working class would take power.

An HWAC member pointed out that independent workers action committees had to be built in health, education, plantations, ports, power and other sectors as well as in neighborhoods, with similar committees built by the rural poor. The HWAC explained that the SEP had called for the convening of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses attended by democratically elected delegates from workers and rural poor action committees from across the island.

Such a congress, he said, would discuss and lead the fight for establishment of a workers’ and peasants’ government committed to socialist policies. In this struggle Sri Lankan workers would unite with their class brothers and sisters internationally through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, initiated by the International Committee of the Fourth International.

It was suggested during the discussion that meetings should be held with workers in every ward to expand the action committee’s support through Kandy General Hospital. This suggestion was unanimously endorsed.

The meeting unanimously passed a resolution moved by an HWAC member supporting the campaign launched by the Plantation Workers Action Committee to defeat the joint witch-hunt by the police and management of Alton Estate in Maskeliya district against militant workers in the estate who went on strike for over a month in February 2021 to demand higher wages.

HWAC members campaigned strongly for last Saturday’s meeting speaking to workers from most of Kandy Hospital’s health units.

A majority of hospital employees denounced the introduction of paying wards.

One office worker said: “When the limited resources in hospitals are shifted to patients who can pay, services for ordinary non-paying patients will further deteriorate. The retirement and overseas migration of health staff has accelerated and there are no new recruitments. We are already overworked but this will worsen with paying wards.” Health workers’ wages will probably depend on income from paying wards and this would lead to “a complete breakdown” of free healthcare, he added.

A nurse explained that the paying wards would lead to a further gutting of the public health service. “Already, patients are forced to purchase medicines from private

pharmacies. This situation definitely will be aggravated by paying wards,” she said.

The nurse, who has two school-going children, said she is unable to provide nutritious meals for her children. “Yesterday four of us had to share two eggs. We cannot live without food and medicines, but we will have to win them through struggle. For that the workers need a united revolutionary program,” she said.

Several nurses pointed out that there were conflicts between health staff workers and the patients’ relatives because of the lack of beds. “Responsibility for everything lies with the staff,” one nurse said. “We have to explain to people the situation we face and unite them with our struggle. The trade unions are hostile to this sort of united fight.”

Another nurse explained how the trade unions have divided the health workers. “Unions have done nothing for any section of health workers. They are hostile to united action. Today we need a program to unite the workers. I’m in agreement with the HWAC,” she stated.

Health workers denounced the statements made by trade unions, including the Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) which had held discussions with IMF officials and claimed that it had “progressive” proposals.

An employee working in the hospital kitchen said: “We are extremely exploited. No one talks about our difficulties. When we go home, our children have empty stomachs.”

One nurse spoke about last year’s popular uprising which ousted the government of then President Gotabhaya Rajapakse: “We intervened in that struggle with lots of hope, but the trade unions, in unison with the capitalist parties, betrayed us. Nobody explained what sort of government was being put into power after we chased out Gotabhaya [Rajapakse]. For the coming fight, we should go forward with our own program. Action committees should be built at every workplace.”



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