

Sri Lankan health unions call off strike as government refuses to address workers' demands

Our reporters
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Tens of thousands of Sri Lankan state hospital employees held a national strike on Tuesday to demand a 35,000-rupee (\$US108) monthly Disturbance, Availability and Transport (DAT) allowance. It was their second walkout, following a two-day action beginning last Thursday, over the same demand.

The scheduled sick-leave strike was organised by the Health Trade Union Alliance (HTUA), a coalition of 72 organisations. It represents radiologists and laboratory technicians, pharmacists and drug compounders, midwives, ECG technicians, public health inspectors, entomology officers and health assistants. The HTUA had previously indicated that strike would continue if their demands were not met.

The industrial action was called in response to a government announcement early last week that it would pay a 35,000-rupee monthly increase in the DAT allowance for government medical doctors.

The HTUA leadership called off the action yesterday morning, after declaring that the talks with acting State Minister of Finance Shehan Semasinghe and the Health Minister Ramesh Pathirana had failed. Semasinghe said he would submit the unions' demands to President Ranil Wickremesinghe, who is also the finance minister, when he returns to Sri Lanka today.

The HTUA bureaucracy called the DAT strike, not to organise a genuine fight to defend health workers' living conditions, but to quell the growing anger of their members.

The alliance, which directed its members not to protest but to remain at home, sent a letter to Health Minister Pathirana calling on him to intervene and "solve this problem through discussions to prevent an unrest created by your side in the health sector."

Ravi Kumudesh, one HTUA leader, told the *Island* newspaper on January 16, "We have decided to give some time for the President to solve the problems his Cabinet proposal has created. So we have stopped. However, if the President doesn't solve our problems, we will take action," he said, adding that the unions were willing to compromise.

The real concern of the union leadership is that this "unrest" will coalesce with the rising struggles of other sections of workers opposing the government's privatisation and job-destruction policies, and the intolerable living conditions created by this month's increases in the Value Added Tax (VAT). In the first week of January, tens of thousands of Ceylon Electricity Board employees participated in a three-day sick note campaign opposing the privatisation of the state-owned enterprise.

As Kumudesh remarked in March 2023, "If we call on workers to participate in a joint struggle, everybody would come onto the streets. We've been keeping people suppressed, saying that we cannot do these sort of strikes."

Chief of Defence Staff General Shavendra Silva told the media yesterday that personnel from all three branches of the country's armed forces had been mobilised to work in hospitals. Soldiers have been involved in offloading ambulances, pushing carts, record keeping and other work. The government also deployed soldiers for scab work during last week's two-day walkout.

While the trade union leadership have not opposed the use of the military as strike-breakers, all health workers and the working class as a whole must forthrightly

oppose this assault on basic democratic rights. The government's use of the armed forces is a dress rehearsal for even more ruthless interventions against the working class.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna-affiliated All Ceylon Nurses' Union (ACNU), Government Nursing Officers' Association (GNOA) and the Public Services United Nurses Union (PSUNU) did not participate in yesterday's action. The ACNU held separate lunchtime protests at Colombo National Hospital and several other hospitals. PSNU members, however, overwhelmingly joined the HTUA protests last week, defying their union leadership's call not to strike.

The Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) leadership, instead of supporting their fellow health workers, has denounced them for taking industrial action. The DAT payment, the GMOA bureaucracy has cynically declared, is just for doctors and no one else. This divisive response, like that of other health workers' unions, plays into the hands of the government by separating health employees according to their grades and professions.

The government of President Ranil Wickremesinghe opposes any increases to public sector workers' pay. In line with IMF demands for a drastic reduction of state expenditure and for sharp increases in government revenue, it is determined to slash the real wages of workers and the meagre income of the poor.

Like all other sections of the trade union bureaucracy, the health unions support the IMF's dictates. Kumudesh is publicly on record saying that he "personally" supports its austerity program.

Opposing any development of a unified industrial and political action by workers against the government's austerity measures, the trade union leadership call separate isolated action on single issues, insisting that the government can be pressured to grant their demands. Past experience has demonstrated that such actions are futile.

WSWS reporters discussed these issues with workers from Colombo National Hospital this week.

One striker, who had been at the hospital for about 35 years, explained his situation. "I'm just two years from retiring but only take home 35,000 rupees monthly, after deductions for loans. We were only given a coronavirus allowance for only one month during the

pandemic.

"Bus fares and food items' prices have gone up—we're only able to eat half of what we need—and electricity and water bills are high. My three children have no jobs and my wife is unwell and a patient," he said.

"When we strike, it impacts on patients and we may be blamed but we are helpless. I don't believe pressuring the government will work. If the government's listening to us, we would not be in the situation we're in today," he added.

Sri Lankan health employees have been involved in more strikes and protests than any other section of the Sri Lankan working class since 2020. Now they need to politically review what has occurred.

To organise a genuine united struggle for their rights and for unity with other workers who are facing similar attacks, health workers must take matters into their hands. This means establishing their own democratically controlled action committees, independent of the trade unions and all the pro-capitalist parties, and fighting for a socialist program where human need takes precedence over profit.

Some health workers—including doctors, nurses, technical employees and health employees—who have understood the need for organising independently of the trade union straitjacket have already formed a Health Workers Action Committee and joined with their global counterparts through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

We urge health workers now coming into struggle across the island against the brutal attacks of the Wickremesinghe government to contact the Health Workers Action Committee and discuss how to establish of a similar committee in your workplace.

Contact us by email at health.action.committee@gmail.com or phone +94 (71) 342 1150



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