

Sri Lankan health unions end two-day strike, claiming “positive response” by government

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4 February 2024

The Health Trade Union Alliance (HTUA) ended a two-day strike on Saturday after Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe agreed to arrange a meeting between finance ministry officials and union officials on February 6 to “resolve the matter.”

Tens of thousands of health employees walked out to demand a 35,000-rupee (\$US108) increase in their Disturbance, Availability, and Transport (DAT) allowance. It was the third national industrial action by health workers this year. On January 16 and 17, health employees held a two-day strike over the same demand.

On January 8, the government agreed to increase the DAT allowance to doctors from 35,000 rupees to 70,000 rupees but refused to grant this increase to other health workers.

HTUA convener Ravi Kumudesh told the media that the strike was temporarily called off because the government had made a “positive response.” He warned that if the government failed to meet health workers’ demands, the strike would resume on Wednesday.

The HTUA is a collective of 72 health sector trade unions, including a joint federation of interim medical services unions, the health professionals’ federation, the public health officers’ union and the government midwives’ union.

Those involved in last week’s strike included radiology and laboratory technicians, pharmacists, drug compounders, midwives, dental surgeons, public health inspectors, entomology officers, nurses and minor staff, bringing hospital services to a standstill.

Just as it did during its mid-January strike, the HTUA directed its members last week not to hold any protests but to remain at home.

The government responded by deploying hundreds of army personnel as strike-breakers to 45 hospitals. The mainstream media reacted by shedding crocodile tears over the situation facing patients in a transparent attempt

to whip up public hostility against health workers.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-led All Ceylon Nurses Union (ACNU), the Frontline Socialist Party-led Joint Health Services Union (JHSU) and the government-controlled Public Services United Nurses Union refused to join the strike. The ACNU and JHSU ordered its members to keep working, claiming that the strike was a government conspiracy.

Some members of these unions, however, defied their union leaderships and joined the walkout. The ACNU responded by sending a letter to its striking members at Gampola Hospital in central province, ordering them to return to work.

“A group of some members of our union have joined the strike... It is not successful at any main hospitals. Moreover, there is a danger to our members if they continue this strike. Our members should report to work tomorrow,” the letter declared.

The ACNU’s direct intervention against the strike flows from the nationalist and pro-capitalist politics of the JVP to which it is affiliated. The main concern of the JVP and its electoral front, the National People’s Power (NPP), is the forthcoming elections in which it hopes to win more parliamentary seats.

Under conditions where Wickremesinghe’s United National Party, the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, and the opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya are thoroughly discredited, the JVP/NPP is signalling to the ruling elite that there is nothing to fear as it does not support any mass industrial action by the working class.

The Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA), the union of public sector doctors, opposed last week’s strike on a sectorial basis, determined to keep health workers divided along professional and grade lines. It declared that doctors were the only ones entitled to receive the DAT allowance.

The Government Nursing Officers Association, which is led by Saman Ratnapriya, who was appointed the Director General of Trade Unions last year by President Wickremesinghe, called on his members to join the strike to try and maintain his discredited union's hold on nurses.

Notwithstanding these desperate manoeuvres, last week's national health strike is a part of a rising wave of strikes and protests in Sri Lanka and globally against government and employer attacks on jobs and working conditions in the face of the rising cost of living. In the first week of January nearly 22,000 Ceylon Electricity Board workers held three days of national protests to oppose the government's moves to privatise the state-owned enterprise.

Last week's health workers' walkout is another indication of the determination of Sri Lankan workers to fight for their jobs and conditions against the Wickremesinghe government's International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated austerity attacks.

The HTUA leadership, however, is determined to prevent a genuine, nationally unified struggle of health employees coming into conflict with the government. Having called short-term industrial action to dissipate the rising anger of its members, the HTUA bureaucracy is preparing to negotiate a filthy backroom deal which it will impose on members.

HTUA convenor Ravi Kumudesh told the media last week, "Since 2020, we have not demanded anything from the government, given the country's situation," he said. In other words, the unions have done all they could to assist the Sri Lankan capitalist ruling class overcome its unprecedented economic crisis.

Like all the trade unions in Sri Lanka, the health sector unions have blocked development of a genuine struggle of the working class against the government's efforts to impose the full burden of the economic crisis on the working class and the rural masses and the associated attacks on their social and democratic rights.

Like the government, the trade union bureaucracy is deeply concerned about the growing struggles of the working class. They fear that workers' determination to fight for their jobs and basic rights will rapidly develop into the type of popular uprising that in April–July 2022 led to the ouster of then President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government.

The HTUA has repeatedly appealed to the president and his government "to resolve the issues" through discussions, complaining that unless there is a deal, they

will face a situation that they cannot control.

The surging cost of living and falling real wages facing health workers and the working class in general is the direct consequence of the government's IMF-dictated policies. The IMF has warned that the future installments of its \$US3 billion bailout loan to Sri Lanka will be suspended if Colombo fails to implement its demands. The Wickremesinghe government has responded by making clear that it will not tolerate any opposition from the working class and will brutally repress any such movement.

This is indicated by its brutal reaction to the three-day national anti-privatisation protests of workers of Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) in early January. On government orders, management sent "show cause" letters to all CEB workers who joined the action. Sixty-six workers have already been suspended and another 75 face suspension.

Contrary to the claims of the union leaderships, health employees and other sections of the working class cannot defend their jobs, living standards and basic rights by pressurising the government.

In order to move forward workers must take control of their own struggles. This means building action committees, democratically elected and controlled by workers in all workplaces, including hospitals and health institutions, and independent of the trade union bureaucrats and all capitalist parties.

Only these committees can provide the framework for a united struggle of the working class against the government and its IMF policies. Such an independent political movement of the working class, rallying the rural masses, must be based on socialist policies that places human needs above private profit.



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