

Sri Lankan unions end health workers strike, citing an offer of ministerial talks

W.A. Sunil
14 February 2024

On Wednesday morning, the Health Trade Union Alliance (HTUA), a combination of 72 health sector trade unions, ended a two-day strike following an offer of talks on February 19 with the Sri Lankan Health Minister Ramesh Pathirana. Public health workers are demanding an increase in the current Disturbance, Availability and Transport (DAT) allowance.

At Monday midnight, Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe imposed its Essential Public Service Act (EPSA) to ban the ongoing public health employees' industrial action. Over 100,000 health workers, however, defied the government's repressive measures and continued their industrial action for an increased allowance.

Those involved in Tuesday's industrial action included radiology and laboratory technicians, pharmacists, nurses, midwives, public health inspectors and entomologists who walked out after the collapse of previous talks between finance ministry officials and health trade unions. The nationwide action paralysed all public health services apart from children, cancer, maternity and kidney hospitals, the institute of mental health and blood banks, which were exempt from the sick-note strike.

Wickremesinghe's repressive gazette declares, "all service connected to the maintenance and reception, care, feeding and treatment of patients in hospitals, nursing homes, dispensaries and other similar institutions" to be an essential public service.

It states that, "any employee who does not attend work and is convicted after summary trial before a Magistrate" can be imprisoned for two to five years and fined between 2,000 and 5,000 rupees (\$US6 to \$16) or both. The "movable and immovable property" of those convicted can also be seized by the state and their names "removed from any register maintained for profession or vocation."

The government responded to this week's industrial action by mobilising over 1,000 military personnel as strike-breakers, deploying to them dozens of hospitals, under the pretext of maintaining the health service. The capitalist media feigned concern for hospital patients while publishing provocative articles in an attempt to whip up hostility against the health workers.

It is the second time this year that the Wickremesinghe

government imposed essential service measures to suppress workers' democratic rights in Sri Lanka.

In January, the Wickremesinghe government used the EPSA against Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) workers taking national strike action from January 3 to 5, to protest privatisation of the state-owned enterprise. It followed this with a brutal witch-hunt against the CEB workers, suspending at least 66 workers for their involvement in the industrial action.

In January, the government doubled the monthly DAT allowance paid to doctors, increasing it from 35,000 to 70,000 rupees (\$US100 to \$US200). It refused, however, to grant any increase to other health workers.

Health employees responded by demanding an increase in their allowances on the basis of their initial basic salary. They are currently paid a Special Allowance (SA) of between 1,000 and 3,000 rupees per month, according to their grades. Finance ministry officials in talks with HTUA officials on Monday rejected union demands, offering to only increase the allowance by 3,000 rupees.

While HTUA members have struck twice, in January and early February, over their demand, the pro-government Public Services United Nurses' Union (PSUNU) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-controlled All Ceylon Nurses Union (ACNU) have denounced the industrial action, directing their members to keep working.

In an attempt to deflect rising opposition within the union's ranks to the government attacks, the ACNU called a protest on Wednesday near the Health Ministry in Colombo, calling for an increase in allowances, including for higher uniform allowances.

Once again, Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) and Government Medical Officers Forum (GMOF) officials publicly attacked the health workers' action.

GMOF president Rukshan Bellana denounced the strikers as "thugs" and urged the government to take "decisive actions to address the situation." He provocatively declared that the public health sector needed "professionals" in medical, nursing and administrative areas, suggesting an even more extensive use of contract labour.

While the HTUA was compelled to strike again this week, it limited the action to a sick-note campaign, refusing to organise

mass protests and demonstrations and directing workers to remain at home. The HTUA bureaucracy opposes the development of unified nationwide industrial by health workers and other sections of the working class and is desperately trying to organise a sell-out deal with the government.

In a slavish letter to the secretary of the Health Ministry on Monday, the HTUA apologetically rejected a sub-inflation allowance offer, saying, “We regret to inform you that the executive council has unanimously decided to resort to strike action again.” The letter concluded with an appeal for President Wickremesinghe to get involved and “quickly” resolve the dispute.

On Tuesday, HTUA co-convener Ravi Kumudesh told the media that if the health minister contacted the union and offered more talks, the alliance would stop the strike. Predictably, the union ended the industrial action as soon as Health Minister Pathirana offered more talks.

Like the rest of the trade union bureaucracy in Sri Lanka, the health sector unions, notwithstanding their tactical differences and political affiliations, are determined to prevent a genuine struggle of the working class against the Wickremesinghe government and its International Monetary Fund dictated policies.

Health workers who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* expressed their anger over the Wickremesinghe government’s escalating attacks and condemned the reactionary role being played by the trade unions.

An ambulance driver at a local hospital in Puttalam district explained that the surging cost of living was imposing harsh conditions on him and his family.

“My basic salary is 24,500 rupees and with overtime I can get 80,000 but I have two school-going children. I can’t afford education and transport expenses so my salary needs to be increased,” he explained.

Commenting on union claims that protests would pressure the government to change course, he said, “The government doesn’t listen to our demands because it is implementing the IMF’s program. I agree that we need to build action committees, without the distinction of grades and profession, and unite health workers with workers in all other sectors and fight for socialist programs.”

A young health care assistant in Chilaw General Hospital said he only earned 50,000 rupees, including with 200 hours of overtime, per month. “The salary of many employees is not even enough to pay for the cost of travelling. Two employees in my ward have left the job, which now means that our working conditions are getting worse. Health care services cannot be carried out in this way,” he said.

A pharmacist from Karapitiya Hospital in Galle condemned the role being played by the trade unions and said there had not been any democratic discussion with health workers about their demands.

“We do not agree with trade unions because they do not ask

for workers’ consent or ask us about any of our ideas. They don’t try to build unity between workers,” he said.

“There are nearly 40 trade unions in Karapitiya Hospital alone,” he continued. “There was no discussion within the union about the fact that the government deployed the army to disrupt the strike. To win our demand we must build unity among workers,” he added.

Like the Wickremesinghe government, the trade union bureaucracy are deeply concerned about the rising anger of Sri Lankan workers and increased calls for industrial action to fight the government attacks. Above all, they fear that any unified national action by the working class will rapidly transform into the sort of popular uprising that developed in April–July 2022 and led to the ouster of then President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government.

While the cost of living and falling real wages of workers is propelling workers into direct conflict with Colombo’s IMF-dictated program, the Wickremesinghe government will not tolerate any working-class opposition. This is indicated in its ongoing witch-hunt against CEB workers.

In order to defend their jobs, wages and basic democratic rights, workers must take control of their own struggles. If these remain in the hands of the unions, these class battles will be strangled and betrayed.

This requires the building of action committees, democratically elected and controlled by workers in all workplaces, including in the health services, and independent of the trade union bureaucrats and all capitalist parties.

The central task is the building an independent political movement of the working class to rally the rural masses and fight for a program that replaces capitalist rule with a workers’ and peasants’ government committed to reorganise society of the basis of socialist internationalism—for human need, not demands of the government, banks and the big corporations.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact