

Sri Lanka: Build action committees to fight for salary increase, against IMF austerity

Health Workers Action Committee (Sri Lanka)
2 April 2024

Thousands of health workers in Sri Lanka participated in four-hour token strikes from 8 a.m. to 12 noon on Monday and Tuesday at 15 selected hospitals demanding increased Disturbance, Availability Transport allowances. The Health Trade Union Alliance (HTUA) last Wednesday announced that it would call an indefinite strike. However, after discussion with health and finance ministry officials, HTUA leaders called off the strike.

The HTUA has accepted a 3,000-rupee (\$US10) increase in the monthly allowance for some grades and for other grades only a 1,000-rupee increase. These paltry rises demonstrate the need for all health workers to fight for the program advanced by the Health Workers Action Committee. We publish below its statement being distributed among health employees.

Health Trade Unions Alliance (HTUA) convener Ravi Kumudesh announced last week that the alliance will resume strike action for Disturbance, Availability and Transport (DAT) allowance from April 2, as the finance ministry is “delaying discussion” on the issue.

This is the latest of the on/off actions of the HTUA, which represents 72 health sector unions, including a joint federation of interim medical services unions, the health professionals’ federation, the public health officers’ union and the government midwives’ union.

The Health Workers Action Committee (HWAC) is calling for all health workers to join the strike on April 2. However, we warn our brothers and sisters to have no faith in these union leaders and the illusion touted by them that our rights can be achieved by pressuring the government. They have called this action as anger among health workers is developing because government is not responding to their demands. HTUA officials are once again seeking a discussion with finance ministry officials and will call off actions at the first chance they get.

On the part of health employees, they carried out strikes and protest actions in tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands in the recent past on the same demands. The HTUA has called four token strikes since January and on March 12 called a protest at 17 selected hospitals on the island.

As radiology and laboratory technicians, pharmacists, drug compounders, midwives, dental surgeons, public health

inspectors, entomology officers, nurses and minor staff—except those in urgent and critical services—were involved in those actions, hospital services were completely shut down.

But what did the leaders of the trade unions tell the members? They falsely claimed that President Ranil Wickremesinghe and Health Minister Ramesh Pathirana were ready to “resolve” the DAT issue. Kumudesh sang hosannas for Pathirana saying he was a “principled minister” taking our side, but finance ministry officials were the culprits.

Kumudesh declared that the trade unions are not seeking a “pound of flesh” but only “economic justice.” He also said: “Since 2020, we have not demanded anything from the government, given the country’s situation.” That is, they are ready to accept anything that government gives.

This is not our position. By “the country’s situation,” trade union leaders are speaking about the unprecedented economic crisis of Sri Lanka’s capitalist system, which is tied to world capitalism. The crisis has been accelerated by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic as well as the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza.

The HTUA and all the unions have helped the government put the burden of this crisis onto the backs of workers and the poor in the form of IMF austerity measures, by blocking workers’ struggles.

Real wages in the public sector in Sri Lanka declined to 52 points by mid-2023. This figure is calculated by taking 2013 as the base year equal to 100 points. Last Friday, the government’s Census and Statistics Department announced that living costs of people have gone up by 144 percent since 2019. We know the real situation is worse than these figures.

The working class is not responsible for the crisis of the capitalist class and does not need to share its burden by subordinating our demands to profit interests. Workers are the real producers of wealth and they have the full right to demand a decent salary, compatible with the rising inflation and cost of living.

As we are fighting to defend our rights, we see a similar upsurge of international class struggles. In recent weeks in the US, thousands of janitorial and nursing home workers, teachers as well as Daimler Trucks workers and train drivers in Germany have launched actions to defend their wages and

conditions amid surging inflation.

In Tunisia, thousands joined anti-government demonstrations over poor living conditions and high unemployment. In Nigeria, workers launched a national strike.

The attacks in Sri Lanka on social rights including the suppression of pay demands are part of the government austerity program dictated by the IMF.

Like other trade unions, the health unions divide workers on the basis of grades.

The pro-government Public Services United Nurses' Union, the All Ceylon Health Service Union (ACHSU), which is controlled by the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), and the United Health Service Employees Union (UHSEU) led by pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party are opposing the HTUA campaign on a sectional basis.

The Government Medical Officers Association not only opposes the health staff's demand for DAT, saying the allowance is exclusively for doctors, but collaborates with the government to suppress our struggle. Similarly, the Government Medical Officers' Forum, led by doctor Rukshan Bellana, fiercely opposed the health workers' protest campaign and insulted minor staff by saying they have no right to demand the DAT allowance. These union officials are speaking on behalf of the government.

The public health service has been pushed to the brink of collapse as a result of systematic funding cuts by successive governments over decades.

There is a severe shortage of drugs, medical instruments and health staff, including doctors. In the last week it was reported that the scanning machine at the cancer hospital at Maharagama was malfunctioning. There has been no health infrastructure development. All of this is causing serious difficulties for staff trying to deliver their services properly to patients.

The Wickremesinghe government is accelerating its IMF austerity program, which requires the privatisation of state-owned enterprises and services, including health and education, the widening of the tax network and the cutting of public expenses. The situation we face is bound to get worse.

The government will not tolerate any opposition to IMF austerity and is determined to suppress it brutally. The repressive Essential Public Services Act (EPSA), which criminalizes workers' industrial action, has been used frequently and the military has been deployed to hospitals to break recent strikes. In January, the government used the EPSA against power employees and suspended 62. The health service is also under the EPSA and we face the threat of penalties under this law.

What has been repeatedly proved is the futility of applying pressure on the Wickremesinghe regime to defend rights of health employees or for that matter any section of the working class. Pressuring the government to "get something" is an illusion deliberately touted by union leaders to block a genuine struggle to defend our rights.

Like the government, the trade union bureaucracies fear the growing struggles of the working class will rapidly develop into a popular uprising such as the April–July 2022 mass uprising that led to the ouster of President Gotabaya Rajapakse and his government.

In rejecting the pro-government policies of the trade unions, workers must take the initiative to fight for decent salaries and working conditions and to provide better services for the broader masses.

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

We have formed the HWAC as an initial step and urge our colleagues to take similar initiatives. We are ready to discuss and assist you in taking this initiative.

We advance the following demands in defence of the social and democratic rights of public health employees:

- Billions of rupees to overhaul and modernise the deteriorating health service! Recruit more health employees!
- A decent wage in line with rising inflation and cost of living!
- Hands off the democratic rights of working people! Stop the witch-hunt against power workers and reinstate them unconditionally!

Action committees must reject the unions' attempts to divide workers on the basis of grades and fight for the unity of all health workers and the working class as a whole.

The HWAC insists that the fight to achieve these demands requires a political struggle against the Wickremesinghe government and the capitalist profit system for the reorganisation of the economy in the interests of the majority of people, not the wealthy few.



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