

Thousands of Sri Lankan health workers protest President Dissanayake's budget cuts

Our correspondents
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Several thousand nurses demonstrated outside government hospitals across Sri Lanka on Thursday to oppose the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government's cuts to some of their allowances. Some paramedics participated in the nurses' lunchtime protests that were outside their respective hospitals.

On February 17, President Anura Kumara Dissanayake presented his government's 2025 budget. The International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated measures include the restructuring and privatisation of state-owned enterprises, which will result in the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs, higher levies on a range of essential goods and a grossly inadequate wage increase.

The budget contains cuts to a range of allowances and therefore sharp reductions in the overall take-home pay for nurses, paramedics, health assistants, doctors and other medical workers.

Health workers are angered by the meagre salary increases, with nurses particularly incensed by the government's drastic cuts to overtime and public holiday pay rates and the imposition of longer promotion periods. According to some estimates, health employees monthly take-home pay will be reduced, by at least 800 rupees (about \$US3) starting in April.

Dissanayake's budget doubles the promotion period for nurses from Grade Three to Grade Two from five to ten years, and for Grade Two to Grade One from seven to eleven years. This means it will take much longer for nurses to reach higher salaries and that will impact on their pensions.

There are around 30,000 nurses employed in Sri Lankan public hospitals but the trade union bureaucracy from rival health unions did their utmost to limit the protest and keep nurses divided.

While the United National Party (UNP)-supported Government Nursing Officers Association (GNOA) called Thursday's protest, the Public Services United Nurses Union, which is led by Murththettuwe Ananda, a Buddhist monk, took no action, but instead wrote to Health Minister Nalinda Jayatissa calling for changes to the budget measures relating to the health sector.

Health Professional Association leader Ravi Kumudesh told his members that he was waiting for the health minister to reply to his letter calling for changes to the budget. Kumudesh told his members to protest by wearing black arm bands while working.

These trade unions are determined to prevent any unified action by health workers, fearful that this would develop into a direct confrontation with the government and its IMF austerity program.

GNOA president Saman Rathnapriya told the media that the budget severely impacted on nursing and paramedical services, reducing nurses' overtime payments by 65 rupees per hour. He called on the government to resolve these issues while praising the budget as "good and positive."

Rathnapriya, like his counterparts in other trade unions, has a long and notorious record of derailing and betraying workers struggles while being rewarded with various political positions and perks for his treachery. He was made a UNP member of parliament for six months in 2020 and later appointed as a labour advisor to President Ranil Wickremesinghe.

Although only small numbers of health employees participated in Thursday's limited protests, there is rising anger among health employees and every other section of the working class over the deepening attacks on jobs and social conditions.

The health unions, like every other trade union bureaucracy, have systematically scuttled strikes and

protests opposing the IMF austerity agenda. To fight the brutal social attacks of the Dissanayake's NPP government, workers must take matters into their own hands and mobilise independently of the trade union bureaucracies. This requires building of their own independent action committees and developing a unified industrial and political campaign based on a socialist and internationalist perspective. The Socialist Equality Party members spoke to protesting health workers on Thursday, explaining the need for this perspective.

A senior emergency department nurse at Karapitiya Teaching Hospital in the south expressed her disgust with the budget, explaining that her take-home salary would be "sharply reduced" by Dissanayake's budget. Her current monthly pay, which includes overtime, is 130,000 rupees (\$US440). Nurses are working extended amounts of overtime to overcome short staffing in government hospitals.

"This is not what we expected from the government," she said. "We are really shouldering serious responsibilities in our work, but the government treats us very unfairly. This is why we are taking to the streets today against this injustice."

While the emergency nurse is not a member of GNOA she decided to join the protest to show her support. Many nurses are, in fact, not union members because they are opposed to the divisive actions of the union leadership.

Another female nurse from Karapitiya Hospital denounced the budget. "I am not at all happy with it because our monthly earnings have actually decreased," she said.

"This is what we receive for our experience and hard work, even after I've worked as a nurse for 36 years. The government shows no serious concern for health services. I am frustrated as a nurse because of the unbearable working conditions and shortcomings we face in the field," she said.

"It's useless to talk about the trade unions, she added, "because they don't care about us."

A nurse from Ragama Teaching Hospital, north of Colombo, said: "We joined this silent protest because we oppose the budget cuts to our allowances. We, as health employees, are compelled to work overtime and on holidays, whether we like it or not, because of the

shortage of employees.

"An injustice has been done to us and so we demand that the government protect what we have already enjoyed so far. We have faced many injustices, including disregard for our education qualification too," she added. Thousands of nurses had left Sri Lanka in response to the country's ongoing economic crisis.

Although about 2,000 nurses work at the Kandy Teaching Hospital, only around 40 nurses and 12 paramedics participated in lunch-hour action.

A nursing officer explained that many health workers at the facility, including those at Thursday's protest, had voted for Dissanayake and the JVP/NPP but were now criticising the government.

"I voted for Anura Kumara [Dissanayake] and wanted to support this government but we oppose its cuts to our [take-home] salaries. Even though we hoped this government would bring some change, it's operating the same way as previous governments," she said.

Another healthcare employee, who could not join the protest because of her heavy workload, added, "Regardless of who comes to power, this country is governed according to what big business wants." Another healthcare worker said: "We voted for this government. But, in fact, we need a government which truly represents the working people, a system change that workers are governing. For that, workers need education."

Nayana, a nurse from Gampola Hospital in the central province, said: "There was no protest at our hospital today. Many nurses recently joined the JVP union after resigning from GNOA but now they are sending resignation letters to the JVP union. There are about 200 nurses at the hospital but over half of them are not affiliated with any union."



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