

# Sri Lanka: How to fight the Dissanayake government's attacks on public health

**Health Workers Action Committee (Sri Lanka)**  
**6 March 2025**

*We publish below a statement from the Health Workers Action Committee (Sri Lanka) issued on Wednesday morning and circulated among health workers the day before a scheduled 24-hour strike called by the Health Trade Union Alliance (HTUA).*

*The planned March 6 strike against President Dissanayake's budget proposals to cut health workers' allowances, however, was called off by the HTUA, following discussions with Health Minister Nalinda Jayatissa. The HTUA leaders told the media that Jayatissa gave them a "written assurance" that there would be discussion on the issue involving Dissanayake and the treasury secretary within a week.*

*This cancellation was not unexpected. The trade union leadership is acutely aware of growing rank-and-file workers anger over Dissanayake's pro-IMF budget. It was afraid that even its token strike could get out of control and sabotage the government's austerity program. The HTUA's withdrawal of the action followed an identical move by the Government Medical Officers' Association (GMOA), which cancelled a planned doctors' strike on salaries scheduled for March 5 after similar "assurances" by the health minister.*

*These decisions came after IMF Senior Mission Chief for Sri Lanka Peter Breuer warned on March 4 against "potential labour unrest." Sri Lanka's fragile economic recovery, he declared, could be hampered by workers' strikes. Dissanayake's budget, he said, was the "last big push" for Sri Lanka's austerity program and everyone who can "should make a sacrifice."*

*The treachery of the union leaders once again reveals that workers cannot rely on the unions to fight IMF austerity. It is time for rank-and-file workers to take matters into their hands and organise independently from these pro-capitalist organisations. A socialist program is required to defeat the government's brutal attacks on living conditions and democratic rights.*

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The Health Trade Union Alliance (HTUA) has announced a 24-hour strike from 8 a.m. Thursday against the government's budget proposals to cut allowances. Tens of thousands of nurses, paramedics and other affected employees are due to participate in this protest.

The Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA), representing around 20,000 doctors, was to hold a token strike on Wednesday. On Tuesday, however, the union announced that it was calling off the action because Health Minister Nalinda Jayatissa promised to look into the matter.

This last-minute cancellation indicates that the union leadership opposes the organisation of a genuine fight for their members' rights. This is the track record of all the trade union bureaucracies.

The Health Workers Action Committee (HWAC) fully supports health workers action against the proposed budget cuts by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power government. As in other state sectors, health employees will only receive small increases in their salaries, none of them sufficient to compensate for previous erosions of their real wage.

The budget also includes drastic cuts to doctors' and health professional's overtime payments and holiday allowances, long delays in promotions, and the maintenance of worsening workloads. The meagre salary increases, moreover, are not immediate but will be introduced over three years, starting in 2025.

According to one union leader, junior nurses, sisters and matrons would see their respective overtime payments cut by 13,000, 17,500 and 22,000 rupees (\$70, \$94 and \$18) per month. The promotion periods of nurses are to be extended from Grade Three to Grade Two from five to ten years, and for Grade Two to Grade One from seven to eleven years. This will not only delay professional salary increases but stop some nurses from attaining Grade One status before they reach retirement.

The critical question is how to fight these government attacks.

The HTUA's decision to protest on March 6 is because the parliament is to discuss the health ministry budget allocations on that day. This action is not aimed at mobilising health workers in a genuine struggle for their rights but at creating false illusions that the government can be pressured to change course.

These lies were promoted by all the health union bureaucracies, and their counterparts in other sectors, to betray the wave of struggle against President Ranil Wickremesinghe's

austerity measures, starting in early 2023.

The JVP-controlled health unions, including the All-Ceylon Nurses Union (ACNU) and the Public Services United Nurses' Union (PSUNU) refused to participate in the 2023 protests and this week's planned industrial action.

ACNU secretary H.M.S. Madiwatta declared that the 2025 budget proposes "a satisfactory salary increase," and is not the last JVP/NPP budget, implying that future budgets will resolve health workers' problems.

PSUNU president Muruththettuwe Ananda cynically told the media his union would take action if salaries and allowances are reduced when the government finally decides on its proposals.

Health workers must reject these bogus claims and the union leaderships' constant refrain that token protests will pressure the government to make concessions.

The cuts are dictated by the International Monetary Fund. They are now being continued and intensified by Dissanayake's JVP/NPP regime. These measures are designed to impose the burden of Sri Lanka's deep and ongoing economic crisis onto the back of workers and the poor by boosting revenue to the state treasury and repaying foreign debts. The aim is to drive up the profits of investors and big business.

The public health sector confronts a catastrophic crisis. It is reeling under the impact of funding cuts, while private health, including hospitals and other health institutions, are mushrooming for those who can afford its profit-driven fees.

During his budget speech, Dissanayake declared that his government would allocate 604 billion rupees or around 2.8 percent of Sri Lanka's GDP for public health. This tiny increase was hailed as "historic" by the government and media. In fact, health experts calculated in 2015 that spending for free public health should be 5.84 percent of GDP.

Hard hit by COVID-19 in early 2020, the public health service, which has never recovered from the pandemic, faces major shortages of doctors and nurses, dilapidated buildings, outdated equipment and lacks essential drugs and labs. Patients and health employees are all suffering.

The government's paltry wage rise proposal and its savage cuts to overtime rates and other allowances are not limited to the health sector but are to be imposed on virtually every other public sector employee. These measures will be accompanied by plans to privatise and commercialise state-owned ventures, which will destroy hundreds of thousands of jobs.

The collapse of the Sri Lankan economy is a part of a world capitalist crisis with health and other vital social programs the first to be targeted by every government. Big business considers free public health a barrier to its profits and demands that it be transformed into a private profit-making industry.

Health employees can only defend their jobs, wages and hard-won rights by mobilising their political and industrial strength in unified action with workers facing similar attacks. Working

people are not responsible for the crisis of capitalism.

The essential political lessons of recent bitter struggles by health workers and all other sections of the working class are that they cannot go forward while they remain tied to the trade union bureaucracies. These are pro-capitalist entities that support the IMF austerity measures.

The working class, which is the real producer of all wealth in society, must take the fight for decent salaries and working conditions and the right to free, properly funded and equipped public health and education, into its own hands.

This requires building action committees, democratically elected 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 you to take similar initiatives in every hospital and health institution. We are ready to discuss and assist you in taking this initiative.

The HWAC advances the following demands in defence of the social and democratic rights of public health employees:

- Repudiate the foreign debt! We say that these huge funds must be used to develop health, education and social programs!
- Billions of rupees are needed to overhaul and modernise the deteriorating health service! Recruit more health employees!
- A decent wage in line with rising inflation and the cost of living!

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

A united international response is necessary to fight against the IMF-instigated attacks. This requires action committees in Sri Lanka joining the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to develop it as a coordinating centre for global struggles.

The HWAC insists that the fight to achieve these demands and defeat the JVP/NPP government's IMF-dictated austerity program requires an independent political movement of the working class based on a socialist program.



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