Health Workers Action Committee (Sri Lanka) discusses how to fight public health cuts

Our correspondents
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The Health Workers Action Committee (HWAC) in Sri Lanka held an online meeting on March 6 titled, "How to fight wage cuts in the health sector?" Over 50 people joined the event, including health workers from Kandy and Peradeniya hospitals in central province and Jaffna and Kytes hospitals in the north. Representatives of various independent action committees, covering fishermen, port staff, plantation workers, teachers, students and parents, also participated.

The meeting was streamed live on the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) Sri Lanka Facebook page with over 1,250 having watched so far.

HWAC and SEP members campaigned outside hospitals and other workplaces to promote the meeting, circulating thousands of Sinhala and Tamil copies of an HWAC statement issued on Wednesday.

The meeting had added significance because the Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) and Health Trade Unions Alliance (HTUA) had called off scheduled 24-hour strikes for March 5 and 6 respectively to protest the government's 2025 budget. The token strike actions were cancelled after Health Minister Dr. Nalinda Jayatissa promised union officials that he would investigate their concerns.

Nurses and paramedics across Sri Lanka are angered over cuts in the 2025 budget brought down by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government. The axe has been taken to overtime payment rates and allowances and there have been extensions to qualifying for promotion periods. Doctors also oppose cuts to extra duty payment rates and other allowances. Health workers are furious that wage rises promised by the government fail to compensate for inflation and the erosion of real wages.

Dr. Kalum Thushara, a member of the HWAC who chaired the meeting, welcomed participants. The JVP/NPP government came to power, he said, promising to resolve the burning issues in the health sector within a "couple of months." Instead of doing this, it has imposed sharp cuts to health workers' monthly earnings.

Thushara referred to the cancellation of the HTUA and GMOA strikes and said this was not new for the working class. These unions did the same in 2023 when they stopped strike action to demand a meagre wage increase. "These new discussions [with the JVP/NPP government]," he added, "will not bring any solution."

The speaker said that the suppression of workers' rights was an international phenomenon and pointed to the massive attacks by President Donald Trump on American workers. Trump is planning to slash America's Medicaid program to cut hundreds of billions from government spending, he said, and is withdrawing funds to the World Health Organisation declaring it to be "unnecessary expenditure."

The speaker stressed the necessity for health workers and all other sections of the working class to establish independent action committees to fight the government attacks and the betrayals of the trade union apparatus.

Kapila Fernando, convenor of the Teachers-Students-Parents Acton Committee and a SEP Political Committee member, addressed the meeting, highlighting the broad-ranging social attacks contained in President Dissanayake's budget. This includes its privatisation program, which will destroy over half a million government jobs.

The government's cuts in overtime rates and other allowances and its meagre salary increase are not limited to health workers, Kapila pointed out.

"More burdens are coming on top of the already rising poverty. The skyrocketing cost of living has seen the number of people living in poverty rise from 13 percent in 2019 to 25 percent in 2023," Kapala said.

The speaker noted the treacherous role of the trade union leaderships during the mass uprising that brought down the Rajapakse government in 2022.

Forced to call two general strikes involving millions of workers on April 28 and May 6 in 2022, the trade union apparatus, with the assistance of the fake-left Frontline Socialist Party, subordinated workers to the JVP/NPP and the Samagi Jana Balawegaya, and their calls for an interim capitalist regime. These forces helped elevate Ranil Wickremesinghe into the presidency, which was followed by the beginning of the

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International Monetary Fund social attacks, the speaker said.

"These bitter experiences repeatedly demonstrate the need for workers to build their own action committees and to take the fight for their rights into their hands," Kapala explained.

He noted that the HWAC and other action committees have been built in the tea plantations, the ports, railways, the garment industry and among migrant workers. "We have to strengthen these and build more action committees in other workplaces to coordinate and develop an independent movement of the working class," he said.

During the discussion, Dehin Wasantha, a Moratuwa University non-academic worker and an SEP member, spoke about the growing militancy of non-academic workers at state universities. He said that on March 4, thousands of these workers held lunch-hour protests near their respective universities to protest the government's meagre pay rises and cuts to allowances. The government has also slashed non-academic jobs by not filling vacant positions and increasing the workloads of existing employees.

Wasantha reviewed the treacherous role of the JVP-controlled Inter University Service Trade Union, whose leader held in-person discussions with finance ministry officials prior to the budget. He knew in advance of the government attacks but kept this from the rank-and-file members, Wasantha said.

Suranga, a member of the railway action committee, told the meeting, "I completely agree with the content of the meeting because this is the only alternative for the working class. We are discussing with other colleagues how to win other workers to our side." He asked how to get more workers involved in the development of other action committees.

Dr. Donald, a specialist who migrated to the UK, voiced his support for the meeting. He told participants that the UK health sector union bosses betrayed their members' struggle just like their Sri Lankan counterparts. He expressed his strong support for the formation of independent action committees, explaining that these committees are not divided by, or limited to, each profession and have an international program.

Ridma Wimalaratne, a health worker, told the meeting that, "The JVP/NPP has lied to us, claiming that 'it will create an economy so that everybody can live happily.' Now they are saying and acting in a completely different way. They have deceived the people."

SEP Political Committee member K. Ratnayake also addressed the meeting. The vicious attacks on workers' living conditions, he said, directly flowed from the IMF's austerity measures. "The Dissanayake government is fully committed to implementing this program," he said.

Ratnayake said that workers had only been demanding a 20,000 to 25,000 rupee ($US68-85) increase in monthly wages, but the IMF wanted all state expenditures cut, meaning punative limits on wage increases.

The capitalist system is in a huge crisis, he said, and so the JVP/NPP government is attempting to make the people bear the burden. The critical question confronting workers, he said, is how to fight these austerity measures?

"The betrayal of the health unions and other unions is not a surprise. They all agree with the IMF program and accept the capitalist system," Ratnayake said. He then referred to the participation of several trade union leaders in a "roundtable" online discussion with IMF officials a few weeks after the IMF approved a bailout loan in March 2023.

"The ruling elite and the IMF use the trade union apparatus as a tool to impose their austerity demands."

"Workers cannot rely on the union apparatus to win their rights. The working class has an enormous power if they break from these pro-capitalist organisations and when they organise as a class," he said.

Ratnayake said it was necessary to build other action committees. Democratically elected and controlled by workers, these committees will decide what actions can be organised to fight for workers' demands and to reach out to other workers, including their international class brothers and sisters.

Ratnayake referred to the railway worker's question about organising broader sections of the working class and said this was the essential task. He pointed out that workers all around the world are facing the same questions and noted developments in the US and other countries.

"We need to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to unite the struggles globally and Sri Lankan workers must join this fight," he said.

Ratnayake said the SEP in Sri Lanka has called for the building of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses, based on the delegates from actions committees of workers and the rural poor.

"We made timely warnings that the role of a JVP/NPP government would be to serve big business and international capital. The intensifying attacks of this government on social and democratic rights will bring the working class into conflict with it. This why the building of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses as a fighting centre has become all the more important," Ratnayake said.

This congress would take forward the fight for a workers' and peasants' government and the implementation of socialist policies as part of an international struggle.

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