

Sri Lankan health union leader says workers will make “sacrifices to enhance the economy”

W.A. Sunil
1 April 2025

Public health sector trade unions in Sri Lanka have abandoned their protest campaign against the Dissanayake government’s cuts to overtime and holiday allowances, fully accepting its false promise to restore the allowances to previous levels when the economy improves.

Thousands of public sector nurses demonstrated on March 17 against the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People’s Power (JVP/NPP) government’s 2025 austerity budget. The next day about 30,000 health professionals went on strike while doctors were planning industrial action in opposition to the budget.

Confronted with the widespread anger of health sector workers, Sri Lankan President Dissanayake declared on March 21, the final day of the parliamentary debate on the budget, that his government had decided to revise its planned rate cuts for allowances. Accordingly, the previous rate of calculating those allowances will be partially paid—i.e., at 2/3, 3/4 and 4/5 of the previous rates—until the economy is “restored.”

Ravi Kumudesh, president of the Federation of Health Professionals (FHP), immediately seized on the announcement, hailing it as a “positive sign” in a video statement.

“Although the health workers are losing a portion of their allowances,” he said, “the government has promised to restore the previous rates as soon as the country’s economy improves.” Kumudesh appealed to the government to “recognise the sacrifices made by health workers to improve the economy” and keep its promise.

The JVP/NPP government has rejected any changes to its extension of the promotion periods for nurses in the budget, which directly impacts on their salary increments and pensions. This cost-cutting measure extends the promotion period from Grade Three to Grade Two from five to ten years and from Grade Two to Grade One from seven to eleven years. This means that many nurses would

not reach Grade One before they reach retirement age.

Kumudesh and the rest of the health trade union bureaucracy have also accepted insignificant salary increases announced in the budget, rises that fail to make up for inflation, which skyrocketed to 70 percent in August 2023.

In line with the treachery of the entire trade union bureaucracy, Kumudesh boasted in the same interview: “We were able to halt the spread of strikes that were about to emerge, particularly in the postal and railway services.”

The FHP president was referring to the postal and rail service union leaderships’ immediate embrace of Dissanayake’s minor revision of cuts in allowances to shut down all industrial action. On March 17–18, the postal union leaders called a limited two-day national strike of about 19,000 postal workers to protest the government’s cuts to allowances and other attacks. Although these demands were not addressed by the government, the postal union leadership stopped any further union action.

Addressing a March 22 press conference, Chamil Wijesinghe, the media spokesperson for the 16,000-strong Government Medical Officers Association, “welcomed” the government’s “favourable resolution” of conflicts over doctors’ additional duties.

In his video Kumudesh urged finance and health ministry officials to “listen to the trade unions and maintain good communication and a fair deal.” This is a direct appeal to the JVP/NPP government to coordinate its cost-cutting attacks with the trade union apparatus so that it can more effectively divert and suppress the rising anger of the working class.

Notwithstanding the political myths spread by Kumudesh and Wijesinghe, the government is ruthlessly imposing its austerity budget, measures that were developed under International Monetary Fund (IMF)

supervision.

IMF Managing Director Kristina Georgieva has hailed President Dissanayake for his unwavering determination to implementing these social attacks.

“My very first message to you, Mr. President, is bravo. Congratulations for what you have achieved. I know it is not easy, but perseverance and strength of commitment does pay off,” she declared.

While the trade union bureaucracies are doing their utmost to prevent a political and industrial confrontation with the Dissanayake regime, there is growing anger among state sector workers against its IMF policies. Strikes and protests by health, postal and railway workers are just a small indication of the rising opposition in the working class.

The JVP/NPP administration is a pro-capitalist regime that defends the interests of international finance and big business. The government’s below-inflation pay increases and its cuts to allowances are only part of broader attacks announced in the budget.

These include the destruction of around half a million jobs through the restructure of nearly 500 state-owned enterprises, with some companies closed outright and others placed under a state holding company in preparation for privatisation.

Hostile to any independent mobilisation of the working class, the health union leaders, like the rest of the trade union bureaucracy and the Dissanayake government itself, feared that health workers’ protests would spread to other sections of the working class.

To defend their jobs, wages, working conditions and democratic rights, Sri Lankan workers need to fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government based on socialist policies. This means taking up the program advanced by the Socialist Equality Party, which calls on workers to mobilise independently of all capitalist parties and the trade union bureaucracies through the building of action committees in every workplace.

Several doctors and health employees spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site*, voicing their opposition to the government’s budget cuts and the treachery of the union leaders.

A senior doctor from Kandy National Hospital denounced the JVP/NPP government for imposing measures dictated by the IMF. Its budgetary proposals and promised salary increases were just a “numbers game,” he said, criticising any perception that the JVP was left-wing and insisting that it serves capitalist interests.

“The government has made misleading claims about

reinstating allowances. It says a portion would be paid once the economy recovers. This promise will never materialise,” he continued.

He said he was deeply dissatisfied with the trade union bureaucracies, accusing them of betraying their members by “failing to communicate about discussions concerning salary and allowances.” Union members would have opposed the union leaders’ treachery if a meeting had been organised, he said.

Highlighting the detrimental impact of funding cuts on health services, he explained that healthcare professionals “are grappling with immense challenges, including inadequate staffing and shortages of essential medical equipment.”

Prasad, a public health inspector, said it was a lie to say that the government would revise the allowance cuts and continue to pay them as before.

“Like the previous administration,” he said, “this government is also trying to rule the country through lies and false promises. We are waiting for the government to pay the increased salaries. If the government is trying to force the cuts in allowances, we must fight it.”

Nishadi, a Marawila Base Hospital nurses in the Northwestern Province, denounced the government’s miniscule salary increase, calling it a fraud.

“My salary is about 80,000 rupees, from which I pay 35,000 rupees in loan instalments. Additionally, I need to spend another 20,000 rupees on my husband’s medical expenses. It’s a serious struggle to manage day to day living expenses while also educating my child,” she said.

“The trade union leaders support the government’s vague promises about salary increases after economic recovery, but this is misleading and won’t happen. US President Donald Trump will further affect the global economy which will lead to a worsening economic crisis in Sri Lanka. I’m a member of the JVP trade union, but I do not agree with their stance.”



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)