

A revealing episode in the Sri Lankan election: troops deployed against striking workers

By Saman Gunadasa
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The brutal class reality behind all the false promises being made in the November 17 presidential election was graphically exposed by the line up behind the government's decision to deploy troops against striking health workers on October 27-28.

The current minority government is headed by the Sri Lankan Freedom Party (SLFP) whose candidate Mahinda Rajapakse has been promising to raise the salaries of government workers and to improve the health system. But confronted with a two-day strike by health workers for better pay, his health minister Nimal Siripala de Silva invoked his powers under the current state of emergency and despatched thousands of armed military personnel to public hospitals to carry out their work. Around 300 soldiers and police were deployed at the national hospital in the capital of Colombo alone.

Health Minister de Silva tried to blame the opposition United National Party (UNP), declaring that "this strike has been organised according to the wish of a political party opposing the government." But the UNP, which is just as hostile to the working class as the SLFP, did not claim responsibility for the strike or come to the defence of the health workers. In fact, UNP candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe had nothing to say at all on the issue.

The silence came as no surprise to health workers who know from their own bitter experience that the UNP is no better than the ruling United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA). In 2003, when the UNP led the ruling coalition, it sent thousands of military personnel into hospitals to break a 13-day island-wide strike by health workers calling for a pay rise and an end to salary anomalies. In this case, the UNP did not even bother with the legal niceties of declaring a state

of emergency to justify the blatant use of military in civil affairs.

The main demand of the latest strike was that the government live up to its promises, at least partially, made at the general election held in April 2004. In that campaign, the SLFP and its allies, including the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), pledged to increase the salaries of government workers by 70 percent. Immediately after winning the election, however, the promise was deflated to 40 percent, up to a maximum of 9,000 rupees a month (\$US88) and spread out over two years—2005 and 2006.

The strike was provoked by a government circular which eliminated the second 20 percent increase due in 2006. While Rajapakse was promising to increase the monthly salary of government workers by 3,000 rupees after the election, his health minister de Silva was declaring that he could not possibly give in to the demand of health workers for the government to honour its previous pledges. "If we give in to their demands all other state sectors would also follow suit," he said.

The two-day strike paralysed hospitals and medical institutions throughout the island as thousands of health workers, Assistant Medical Officers, Registered Medical Officers, paramedics, laboratory technologists, clerical staff, minor staff, drivers and nurses walked out, defying the government's threat to deploy the military. The stoppage was organised by the Health Sector Trade Union Alliance (HSTUA), an umbrella organisation of 54 health sector unions, which called a one-day strike on October 19 on the same issue.

The most pernicious role in the latest strike was played by the JVP—a populist party based on Sinhala

chauvinism, which at times claims to be “socialist”.

Having formed an electoral pact with Rajapakse, the JVP echoed de Silva’s lie that the strike was organised to assist the UNP. Its own All Ceylon Health Services Union (ACHSU) refused to join the strike and pressured other workers not to participate.

The JVP, along with the aides of Health Minister de Silva, Health Ministry management and the military, established an “operation centre” against the strike. Health workers alleged that JVP leaders used crude threats against casual workers to get them to sign the attendance registers. The JVP also brought in outsiders to attempt to give the impression that all was normal in the hospitals.

State-run and private media alike also sought to play down the strike as a failure. Carefully staged-managed TV footage showed hospitals running “normally”. *Divaina* declared on its front page: “The effect of the health workers strike on patients is minimal. Normal services are being maintained with the assistance of army and navy.” But it was no secret to the public, which in the past has sympathised with the health workers actions, that the hospital system was not functioning.

As for the HSTUA leaders, they were never intent on waging a determined campaign against the government. Far from being in the camp of the UNP, HSTUA officials reached “an understanding” with Rajapakse to call off a proposed countrywide hunger strike and other industrial action. As far as the HSTUA leadership was concerned, the purpose of the campaign was to be limited to extracting a better deal from Rajapakse if he should become the next president.

The track record of the HSTUA leadership demonstrates the bankruptcy of such a political approach. The same leaders called off the 13-day strike in 2003 in return for promises that proved to be empty. The ruling UNP-led coalition finally granted a pay hike of about 40 percent, in instalments, in February 2004, but within weeks President Chandrika Kumaratunga arbitrarily sacked the government. It turned out that about 40,000 provincial council workers—nearly half of all health sector employees—were denied the increase.

Far from going on the offensive against the new SLFP-led coalition that took office in April 2004, the HSTUA suspended all industrial action in July and granted the weak minority government a crucial

three-month “breathing space” to allow the health minister time to work out his response to the union demands. The government refused to budge and, as a result, salary anomalies for registered and assistant medical officers are still not resolved.

The response of the political establishment to the health workers strike is a warning of what is in store after the election. There have been a growing number of strikes and protests by bus workers, university workers, railway and postal workers against privatisation and over the escalating cost of living. Whether Rajapakse or Wickremesinghe wins the election, the result will be the same. The next president will rapidly tear up his election pledges and use all available means to crush any opposition by workers, students and farmers.

The Socialist Equality Party and its candidate Wije Dias are the only ones in the election offering a clear cut alternative: instead of a long list of false promises, they present a program of struggle. The SEP insists that workers must mobilise independently of all parties of the ruling class and advance their own class interests on the basis of socialist demands. If capitalism cannot provide a decent living standard for working people, then it should be replaced by a society organised on socialist lines to meet the social needs of the majority, not the profits of the wealthy few.

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