

Sri Lankan university workers protest against punitive measures

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Hundreds of workers from the universities of Colombo and Moratuwa took part in a lunchtime protest on Tuesday against punitive action imposed over recent national strike action. All who participated in the two-week strike have had their pay cut and eight union leaders and activists have been suspended. Yesterday Colombo university workers were scheduled to jointly take “sick leave” as part of the same campaign.

The island-wide strike from April 24 to May 7 involved more than 10,000 non-academic workers who were demanding the rectification of longstanding salary anomalies, the payment of monthly compensation allowance (MCA) arrears and an end to the harassment of employee protests. The trade union leaders shut down the strike after university authorities promised to pay part of the salary arrears.

By ending the strike, the unions opened the door for punitive measures. The University Grant Commission (UGC), which administers 13 universities, ordered that strikers accept either a pay cut or a loss of leave to cover the fortnight. Most workers rejected any application for leave, declaring it amounted to accepting that they had not been on strike.

Authorities at Colombo University provocatively cut the monthly salaries of strikers and delayed their payment. Workers immediately walked out in protest last Friday and burned wooden logs in front of the administration premises. In response, eight union officials and activities were suspended on Monday and the police deployed around the university grounds.

The repressive response reflects fears not only in university administrations, but also the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse, of an eruption of struggles over wages, jobs and conditions. Having renewed the civil war against the Liberation Tigers of

Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Rajapakse has been forced to greatly increase military spending and is imposing the economic burden onto working people in the form of rising prices and falling real wages.

During the university workers’ strike, the Rajapakse government relied heavily on trade union leaders to limit the demands and prevent any political discussion, particularly of the implications of the war. The University Trade Union Joint Committee (IUTUJC) includes unions affiliated to Rajapakse’s own Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which is calling for all-out war against the LTTE.

In closing down the strike, the IUTUJC leaders claimed that workers were not ready to fight. Yet despite the poisonous communal climate created by the war, university workers across the island, including Tamil staff at the northern Jaffna university and Muslim employees in the eastern Ampara university, took part in the industrial action.

Under the deal struck between IUTUJC leaders and the UGC, the universities agreed to pay only a quarter of the total salary arrears due—111 million rupees out of 444 million rupees (about \$US4 million)—and 44 million rupees for MCA arrears, and to correct salary anomalies on or before June 20. All this is, however, subject to a review by the cabinet sub-committee on public sector salaries, which was appointed by the president last year following a major public sector strike.

Strikes by university workers have repeatedly erupted during the past decade over the issue of pay. In 2003 and 2004, employees stopped work for three weeks. In July 2005, there was a month-long strike over similar issues. Each time, union leaders ended all industrial action in exchange for the promise of a small fraction

of the pay rise demanded.

Cutbacks to the pay and conditions of non-academic staff are bound up with the broader issue of the market reforms demanded by the World Bank and IMF over the past two decades. Like other essential public services, university education has been increasingly being slashed, privatised and limited to those who can afford to pay.

As part of moves towards privatisation, non-academic jobs including security, gardening and transport have been partially outsourced. The overall workforce has been reduced from 13,000 to 10,000 over the past three years with no replacements being made for retired workers.

Fee-levying courses have been introduced in government-run universities, while local and foreign investors are being encouraged to start private schools and universities. Private educational institutions, which often fail to meet basic standards, are highly profitable and, not surprisingly, are mushrooming. Over the past 18 months, the government has slashed public education, health and other services in order to boost military expenditure—by a massive 45 percent in 2007.

All the trade union leaderships support the government's communal war and its imposition of anti-democratic measures including the essential services laws, which can be used to outlaw strikes. As in other strikes, the unions have not challenged the Rajapakse government and its policies but have sought at every point to contain the struggle and prevent an open confrontation.



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