

A socialist perspective to defend Sri Lankan university workers

The International Students for Social Equality, The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) in Sri Lanka are today distributing copies of the following statement in English, Tamil and Sinhala on university campuses in Colombo.

Tens of thousands of Sri Lankan university workers have been in struggle against punitive actions taken by the United People Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government and university authorities. They are demanding the withdrawal of a pay cut imposed for striking and the reinstatement of workers suspended at the University of Colombo.

Non-academic workers from all of the country's 15 universities held a one-day stopwork on June 4 to fight for these demands. Thousands picketed the office of the University Grant Commission (UGC)—the administrative authority in charge of universities. University of Colombo workers continued their stoppage and, in a bid to contain a groundswell of anger, union leaders promised to call an indefinite strike from June 11. Last Friday, however, the unions shut down all industrial action, including at the University of Colombo, promising only an ongoing campaign and future protests.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls upon working people to support the university workers, who are being sold out by their unions. What is at stake is the defence of basic democratic rights, including the right to strike, as well as jobs, public education and living standards. The attack on university employees is an integral part of the government's attempts to make the working class bear the burden of its renewed communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

University workers across the island launched an indefinite strike on April 24 to demand the rectification of salary anomalies, the granting of a salary increase announced in the 2006 budget and payment of arrears in the monthly compensation allowance (MCA). The Inter University Trade Union Joint Committee (IUTUJC) shut down the strike on May 7 after accepting a government offer to pay just a small portion of salary arrears.

With the end of the strike, the UGC immediately went on the offensive, insisting that workers lose pay or give up leave in lieu of their days on strike. When University of Colombo workers walked out in protest over the unprecedented penalties

and delays in paying their monthly salary, nine union activists were suspended on May 28. The university authorities have forcibly transferred eight workers from the Horana Shri Pali Campus and warned that pay penalties will apply to any further strikes.

Union leaders have tried to blame these punitive actions on “evil” university administrators, but it is the UPFA government which is centrally responsible. Having narrowly won office in November 2005, President Mahinda Rajapakse's response to unrest over declining living standards has been to whip up anti-Tamil chauvinism to divide the working class and to plunge the island back to civil war. Now, in the name of “national security”, his government is riding roughshod over basic democratic rights and branding anyone who opposes its policies as a traitor.

Rajapakse bluntly told a meeting of union leaders at his official residence on May 25 that the government could not afford public sector pay rises because of the war against the LTTE. He denounced the government's critics for doing “the spade work for [LTTE leader] Prabhakaran”. None of the union bureaucrats present challenged the president because, in one way or another, they support his government's communal war.

Working people—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim—are being forced to pay the price of this senseless and criminal conflict. Hundreds of people have been killed, more have “disappeared” and tens of thousands have been driven from their homes over the past 18 months. The government dramatically increased war spending by 25 percent last year and proposes a further 45 percent rise this year. The military budget is projected to be 139 billion rupees (\$US13 billion) for 2007 or 30.3 percent of total government expenditure.

To pay for his war, Rajapakse has slashed public services while continuing to implement the demands of the IMF and World Bank for privatisation and market reform. Public education at all levels including university, as well as health and welfare, has suffered. War spending has accelerated inflation. Rising prices for basic goods have eaten into real wages.

In response to strikes and protests, the government has increasingly used its repressive powers under the ongoing state of emergency. Last December, in the wake of a strike by half-a-

million plantation workers, Rajapakse reimposed the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and branded any “disruption” of essential services as a “terrorist act”. Port workers, plantation workers and now university employees have been treated as traitors and dealt with accordingly.

No section of the working class can conduct a struggle for pay, working conditions and democratic rights outside of a political program to oppose the war, the government that is waging it and the profit system that is responsible for it. A socialist perspective to mobilise workers independently of all factions of the ruling elite is the essential precondition to defend even the most basic interests of the working class. The trade union leaderships are organically incapable of waging such a fight.

The university trade union alliance is a case in point. The IUTUJC consists of the Sri Lanka Freedom Employees Joint Forum (SLFEJF) affiliated to Rajapakse’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP); the Inter University Services Trade Union (IUSTU) controlled by the pro-war Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), and several “independent” unions that are notable only for their failure to take any independent stance.

From the outset, the IUTUJC’s perspective was limited to making a futile appeal to the university authorities, the UGC and the Rajapakse government. In shutting down the strike on May 7, IUTUJC co-secretary H.P. Ariyapala declared that the unions had no alternative, “taking into consideration the government’s monetary and other difficulties”. The IUTUJC leaders gave the same excuse last Friday, calling off all strike action, due to “the prevailing situation in the country”. The “prevailing situation” is nothing but Rajapakse’s racist war.

The militant-sounding rhetoric of the IUSTU, like other JVP-affiliated unions, is based on a lie. On the one hand, IUSTU leaders demagogically posture as defenders of workers and have launched a campaign to demand that Rajapakse rectify increase their pay. On the other, the JVP, the most strident advocate of destroying the LTTE, is demanding that Rajapakse “correctly direct” and intensify the conflict, and that workers sacrifice to put the “Motherland First”. Behind the scenes, the JVP-controlled Inter University Student Federation (IUSF) leaders have been urging the IUTUJC to call off industrial action, once again on the grounds that the “prevailing situation” was not good. The battle cry of workers in any strike or protest has to be: not a man, not a cent for this fratricidal war! Working people, whether Tamil, Sinhala or Muslim, share common class interests, needs and aspirations as was seen in the recent strike when university workers across the island came together. The starting point for a united struggle of the working class is the rejection of all forms of nationalism and communalism—both the Sinhala chauvinism of the Colombo political establishment and the Tamil separatism of the LTTE.

The needs of working people—the vast majority of the population—must prevail over the demands of the corporate elite for greater profits. The SEP calls for salaries to be increased to

provide a decent living wage and indexed against the cost of living. Public education as well as health, welfare, transport and housing, must be expanded to provide affordable, high quality services for all. The SEP calls for the immediate repeal of all anti-democratic laws, including essential services orders, the PTA and limitations on the right to strike.

The only way to end the 24-year war is through a political struggle by workers against the government and parties responsible for its prosecution—the ruling SLFP, the opposition UNP and all their hangers-on. The working class can place no faith in the so-called international peace process. All of its major sponsors including the US, the EU and Japan have been part the neo-colonial US occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan. While claiming to support peace in Sri Lanka, these same powers have tacitly supported Rajapakse’s aggressive military operations.

Workers must advance their own strategy to halt the war. The first demand must be for the immediate and unconditional end to the military occupation of the North and East and the withdrawal of all security forces from these areas. Against the Rajapakse government, which represents the interests of the country’s wealthy elites, the SEP calls for the formation of a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement a program of socialist policies. The struggle for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam must be part of the broader struggle of the working class for a Union of Socialist Republics of South Asia and internationally.

To fight for this internationalist and socialist perspective requires the building of a new mass party of the working class. We call on all those who agree with these policies to make a serious study of our political program, to regularly read the *World Socialist Web Site* and to join and build the SEP, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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