

Sri Lankan unions betray university workers' struggle

Our correspondents
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The Sri Lankan trade unions have carried out another miserable betrayal.

On June 8, just days before a proposed indefinite island-wide strike, the Inter University Trade Union Joint Committee (IUTUJC) called off all industrial action in defence of employees at the University of Colombo who had been disciplined over protest actions. The decision sets a dangerous precedent for the victimisation of other sections of workers seeking to defend jobs, conditions and basic rights.

The workers were among tens of thousands of non-academic university staff from the country's 15 universities who launched an indefinite strike on April 27 to demand the rectification of salary anomalies as well as payment of a promised salary increase and monthly compensation allowance (MCA). The IUTUJC unions shut down the strike on May 7 in return for part payment of the MCA.

In response, University Grant Commission (UGC) went on the offensive, imposing an unprecedented, punitive wage cut covering the strike days. When workers at the University of Colombo protested, the administration suspended nine employees and transferred another eight, provoking a further one-day stoppage on June 4. University of Colombo workers remained on strike. Amid widespread support for action to defend the victimised workers, the unions pledged to call indefinite strike action on June 11.

Having ended all industrial action, the IUTUJC leaders met with UGC representatives in front of the Labour Commissioner on June 14. The outcome of this sordid horse-trading was a wretched stab in the back for the victimised workers. The UGC agreed to "consider" its transfer of eight workers from the Sri Pali campus. In return, the unions agreed to allow university authorities to subject the nine suspended workers to disciplinary inquiries.

Moreover, the UGC did not withdraw its directive to penalise all those who took part in the earlier strike. The IUTUJC is now begging for "redress" from an interim committee chaired by Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayake. The outcome of this empty gesture is predictable in advance. The government has fully backed the UGC in its efforts to cut costs, just as it has slashed expenditure in every other public sector to pay for the huge increases in military spending associated with its renewed

war of aggression against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

The actions of the union leaders are not simply the product of rotten individuals. The IUTUJC is incapable of conducting a consistent struggle in defence of workers because the unions support the government and its reactionary communal war. On both occasions, the union bureaucrats justified calling off strike action by declaring that the "prevailing situation" in the country was not favourable for conducting a struggle.

As the Socialist Equality Party and the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) explained in its statement "A socialist perspective to defend Sri Lankan university workers": "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."

Amid widespread anger among university workers, the unions are desperately trying to deflect blame by accusing each other of selling out the strike. The Inter University Services Trade Union (IUSTU), which is controlled by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), issued a statement on June 15 accusing its partners of "the practices of betrayals and careerism".

In fact, the IUSTU and the JVP-aligned Inter University Student Federation (IUSF) were intimately involved in the plans to shut down all industrial action. The IUSF helpfully suggested the formula of a "broader struggle" involving students, which was then seized upon by the IUTUJC bureaucrats as the pretext for calling off the proposed indefinite strike. So in the name of organising "properly and more broadly," the campaign was called off completely!

It is no surprise that for all its empty militant-sounding rhetoric, the JVP was in the forefront of preventing a political confrontation between university workers and the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse. The same JVP is in the forefront of waging a reactionary "Motherland First" campaign for all-out war against the "Tiger terrorists" and supports all the

government's repressive measures instituted against workers in the guise of protecting "national security".

Speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, workers and students were highly critical of the union leaders. Many were concerned about possible reprisals and did not want their names published.

A University of Colombo worker said: "These trade unions, as in previous cases, accepted the promises of the government and the authorities. I have been working here for 13 years. Now I am in the JVP-controlled trade union. None of these unions are defending workers' rights honestly. The trade union officials say the authorities have misled the president. But is he a baby to be misled? The president appoints the higher authorities and both the government and the authorities have attacked us.

"The government always points to the war to counter the just demands and struggles of workers. The war is like a beggar's deformity for the government. The prices of essentials are going up everyday. The fuel price is to be increased again. Increases of 20 percent in transport charges and 35 percent in electricity are also on the cards.

"Workers in the North and East rallied to our fight without regard for communal differences. It is true, as you say, that workers should oppose the war. The trade union leaders have no program to oppose the repression. Most of the workers have no faith in these unions."

A student from the Arts Faculty at the University of Colombo commented: "The workers' struggle is justified. We should oppose the repression against workers. The student leaders did not tell us anything about this struggle. The student unions are doing nothing to defend our rights. From the outset, the JVP student union has supported this government.

"In several ways, the cuts in education have affected us. The government has plans to allow private universities. Some courses at this university cost around 100,000 rupees. How can a poor student afford such fees? Only about a fifth of students eligible get admission to a university. We have been told that the budget allocation for universities has been slashed by about 20 percent."

A fellow student added: "We do not agree with the IUSF. The government is using the war to increase repression. We Sinhalese and Tamils want to live peacefully and to be united. In fact, the present social system should be changed. We need a socialist movement. But how do we build such a movement? That is the problem we have to solve."

A University of Colombo worker said: "The union leaders whitewash the government, by saying that the university administration is responsible for this attack. But the government is responsible for this attack. Take this war, the emergency laws, the Prevention of Terrorism Act, the skyrocketing cost of living. All of these are against us, not against the rich. The government carries out these attacks under the cover of the war. According to the rulers, we have to

sacrifice everything for this war. But this is not a war of the poor. So why do we have to sacrifice for this war?"

Sudath from the University of Colombo commented: "I had faith in the JVP and now I have lost that. Even after the involvement of their union leaders in this struggle, the JVP keeps silent. All these unions, including the JVP's, betrayed us. The government and the trade unions sing the same song. The government says it cannot fulfill our demands because of the war expenditure. The union leaders say that in this circumstance of war they cannot carry out a workers' struggle. That means that without ending the war we cannot win a single demand. But who will end the war? Both of the [major] parties won't do that. So now we have to find a way ourselves."

Gamini from Peradeniya University said: "We fought to increase our salary. Now we have to fight to defend our existing salary and our leave. The trade union leaders worked to bring this government to power. Can we expect them to fight for our rights? This government brought in the Prevention of Terrorism laws and the Essential Services Orders. Those laws will be used against workers. The JVP told us these laws were brought in to fight the war and supported the passage of these laws."

A worker from university stores commented: "First I thought that the university administration was responsible for this attack; not the government. But one of my friends, a hospital worker, who travels with me on the train, told me that they are also facing this type of pay deduction for participating in a recent strike. These attacks come from the policy of the government.

"Some people say: 'We don't want any struggle. If we earn something, we can survive. No one gives us anything.' I don't agree with that. In a country at war how can you earn? We are told to sacrifice everything for the war. Can workers in Iraq or Afghanistan earn a living? We don't want to go that far. Can people in the North and East of our country, where the war is going on, earn a living? Now the war has come to Colombo."



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