

A socialist perspective for striking Sri Lankan teachers

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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Tens of thousands of Sri Lankan public sector teachers will walk out today on a one-day strike for higher pay. Tamil and Muslim teachers have joined their Sinhala counterparts despite the atmosphere of communal hostility whipped up by the government to justify its return to war. The protest strike takes place amid mounting unrest among working people over the spiralling cost of living.

The trade unions have limited today's strike to the demand for a correction of a pay anomaly, widened by a 1997 government circular, between the salaries of teachers and their colleagues providing other government services such as nursing and clerical services. If the anomaly is scrapped, they say, teachers would receive a salary increase of 5,000 rupees (\$US48) a month.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warns that far more is at stake in this strike. To prosecute its reactionary war, the government is insisting that working people bear the burden. Without a political struggle against the government and its war, the campaign for even the most limited improvements in pay and conditions is doomed to failure.

The government has signalled its stance at a meeting between President Mahinda Rajapakse and the unions on August 13. Education minister Susil Premajayantha bluntly told union leaders that more than 9 billion rupees would be needed to cover the proposed pay rise. President Rajapakse then exclaimed: "We do not have money to allocate for this. Do you say that we should withdraw the military from North and East?"

Ceylon Teachers Union president Joseph Stalin, who reported Rajapakse's comments, omitted the reply. When asked why the unions had not challenged the president, Stalin lamely replied: "And if the government collapses?" In other words, the unions

support the government and will not oppose the war. One of the five unions, the Ceylon Teacher Service Union is affiliated to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, which stridently demands that the war be stepped up, not stopped.

At a meeting on September 6, the message was the same. Ministers Susil Premajayantha, Karu Jayasuriya and John Seneviratne told the assembled unions leaders: "Even for the Samurdhi [welfare program], the annual allocation is only 5-6 billion rupees. So how can we allocate 9 billion for this? If we allocate this huge amount the government will collapse."

The union leaders meekly responded by calling on the government to issue a circular announcing the pay rise, then discuss later where the money would come from. In other words, the unions are seeking a worthless piece of paper to pacify their angry members and have no intention of fighting for a pay rise. Not surprisingly, the ministers rejected this manoeuvre and insisted the war came first.

In last November's budget, the government boosted military expenditure to a massive 139 billion rupees for 2007—a 45 percent increase over 2006. Since then, it has made further allocations as its military offensives in the East and now the North have intensified. Just last week, new tax bills were put before parliament to gouge more money out of the pockets of working people to fill the empty treasury and pay for the war.

Rajapakse has also used the war to suppress democratic rights. Along with emergency powers and the Prevention of Terrorism Act, the president can now proclaim essential service orders to outlaw strikes and protests. Ministers routinely denounce any opposition or criticism as "aiding the enemy". The media has been browbeaten, threatened and violently attacked. The security forces are implicated in the disappearance and

murder of hundreds of people, mainly Tamils, as part of their campaign of intimidation and terror.

The government is demanding that working people sacrifice for its communal war. Anyone who fights for their rights, whether it be public sector workers, university students, farmers and fishermen, university staff or plantation workers, is denounced for “betraying the country”. At a meeting with unions leaders in May, Rajapakse accused some unions of doing “the spade work for [LTTE leader] Prabhakaran”. No one challenged him.

At every point, the unions have caved in to the government. In March and April last year, teachers joined an alliance of public sector workers demanding a pay rise. But when the government denounced the strikes as a threat to “national security”, the unions backed off, called off the campaign and accepted the appointment of a phony National Salary Review Committee as a face-saving device.

The war itself is an expression of the inability of governments, past and present, to resolve the country’s worsening economic and social crisis. Their policies of economic restructuring, privatisation and public sector cutbacks have deepened the divide between rich and poor. In the education sector, the government has opened the door for private schools and allowed branches of foreign, fee-levying universities to mushroom. This year’s allocation for higher education was slashed by 20 percent.

Like his predecessors, Rajapakse responded to growing signs of social unrest by cynically stirring up communal tensions and plunging the island back into a disastrous war. It is the time-honoured adage of “divide and rule” that the Colombo ruling class learned from their British colonial masters. Nothing is a more damning indictment of the ruling elites in Sri Lanka than their inability to end a civil war that has lasted for nearly a quarter of a century, left more than 70,000 dead and devastated the lives of many more.

The basic political lesson that workers have to learn is that it is impossible to fight to defend pay, conditions and democratic rights outside of a socialist program to oppose the war. The working class can only advance its own independent class interests by rejecting all forms of nationalism and communalism. The government’s Sinhala chauvinism and the LTTE’s Tamil separatism both serve the interests of narrow ruling elites, not

those of Sinhala and Tamil workers who all face plummeting living standards.

The SEP demands the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the security forces from the North and East of the island. Not a cent, nor a man for this war. The SEP calls for the repeal of all anti-democratic laws, including the emergency regulations, essential services orders and Prevention of Terrorism Act.

Workers can place no faith in the fraudulent international “peace process” that is being advocated by the same powers that are waging war in Iraq and Afghanistan. The aim of the “peace process” is a deal between the government and LTTE to turn the island into a cheap labour platform for foreign investors. In opposition to this plan of intensified exploitation, the SEP calls on the working class to unite around the struggle for a workers’ and farmers’ government to implement socialist policies. We fight for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the Union of Socialist Republics of South Asia and internationally.

The working class needs to build a mass party to fight for this international socialist perspective. We urge teachers, young people and workers today to study our program, read the *World Socialist Web Site* and apply to join the SEP, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).



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