Sri Lankan unions prepare to cave in following widespread teachers' strike

Our correspondent
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The Sri Lankan government has reacted to a one-day strike of public sector teachers on September 13 with a campaign of police intimidation against individuals and a punitive Supreme Court case against the teacher unions involved. In response, the five unions have all but shut down any further campaign without achieving any pay rise.

The strike was the most widespread by teachers in the country's history, involving an estimated 90 percent of all staff, from the major urban centres to remote rural areas and the plantation districts. Even at prestige schools such as the Royal College and Ananda College in Colombo, where previously only a handful of teachers had taken strike action, the shut down was total.

Most of the island's 240,000 teachers supported the strike, even though only a quarter are union members. The campaign struck a chord with teachers, who have been hit by soaring inflation fuelled by the government's intensifying war on the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Unions are demanding an end to pay anomalies, stretching back to 1997, that would increase monthly salaries by about 5,000 rupees ($US44).

The only areas largely unaffected were the war zones in the North and East of the island, where the LTTE effectively lined up with the government in opposing the strike. A day before the strike, T. Mahasivam, former president of the Tamil Teachers Union (TTU), told the pro-LTTE *Uthayan*, a Tamil-language newspaper published in Jaffna, that the TTU was not taking part in the protest so as not to disadvantage Tamil students already affected by the war. This communal appeal is almost identical to the stance of the establishment media in Colombo, which denounced teachers for compromising students' education.

Despite the mass support for the strike, the unions did everything possible to defuse its impact. No rallies, marches or mass meetings were held. Union leaders told their members to simply stay at home. In other words, while they were compelled to call the strike because of mounting discontent among teachers, the unions were desperate to avoid a confrontation with the government. Any serious struggle would inevitably raise the question of opposing the huge increases in military spending and the war, with which the union leaders in one way or another agree.

In the course of negotiations before the strike, President Mahinda Rajapakse openly challenged the union leaders, saying the government did not have the money for the pay rise. "Do you say that we should withdraw the military from North and East?" he asked them. None of the union leaders present opposed the war. The "militant" Ceylon Teacher Service Union is affiliated to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which not only supports the government's reactionary war, but demands its intensification.

By refusing to lead a political struggle and appeal to other workers, the unions handed the initiative to Rajapakse. Desperate to prevent the eruption of opposition, the government did not hesitate to use the police and courts to harass and intimidate teachers. Instances were reported of police visiting the homes of teachers on September 13 to pressure them not to take part in the protest.

On the same day, union leaders were dragged into the Supreme Court to answer charges arising out of a related protest. The unions had earlier called a boycott of teachers involved in marking this year's GCE (Advanced Level). It was a limited protest aimed at pressuring the government and putting off any strike action. Less than 1,000 teachers are involved in the

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exam marking.

In response, the government went to the Supreme Court, which ruled on September 6 that exam marking should not be interrupted. The September 13 strike was timed to coincide with the day for the resumption of marking announced by the examinations department. The Commissioner General of Examinations (CGE), Anura Edirisinghe immediately took the leaders of the five teacher unions to court, claiming they were violating the previous Supreme Court ruling.

Chief Justice Sarath N. Silva and three other judges took up the case last Friday. Rather than defend the boycott, the unions quickly fell into line. Asked to show cause why they had disregarded the court's ruling and should not be held in contempt of court, the union leaders tried to claim through their lawyers that they were unaware of the court's order. Silva dismissed this lame excuse, pointing out that the ruling had been publicised in the media.

The union leaders will now be tried for contempt of court on November 19 and if found guilty could be jailed. Bail was set at 50,000 rupees. In a further ruling, Chief Justice Silva declared: "During the period of bail the persons concerned should not disrupt the marking of papers. If they committed that offence, it would entail further liabilities on them."

Far from challenging the government and the courts, the unions quickly acquiesced. At a press conference on September 15, the unions announced: "We have to obey the country's law. So we bow to the Supreme Court ruling and abandon our action until the paper marking is over. After that we again start our actions."

The actions of the union leaders are a sure sign that they are preparing to wind up the campaign. Moreover, by shutting down all protests, the unions have opened the way for a witch hunt against individual teachers. On the day of the strike, the WSWS received reports of police taking the details of teachers who did attend exam-marking centres. Last weekend, exam official Edirisinghe told the media he had compiled a list of 15 principals and 270 teachers who had failed to resume exam marking, and intended to take them to court.

The Colombo media are mounting a vicious campaign against teachers. An editorial in the right-wing *Island* on Monday, for instance, equated teachers with "wild beasts." It added: "Their trade union action at the expense of children was tantamount to a mother refusing to breastfeed her crying child baby over a family dispute."

Of course, these same newspapers have nothing to say about the government starving public education of funds, hitting students and teachers alike. There is a complete official silence about the devastating impact of Rajapakse's resumption of war, not only on school children, but on welfare, health care and the living standards of the majority of the population.

Significantly, as they prepare to capitulate to the government, the unions have nothing to say either. As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warned in its statement: "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."

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