

Sri Lankan trade unions betray teachers strike

W. A. Sunil

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At the last minute, an alliance of five teacher unions in Sri Lanka called off a two-day strike by public school teachers scheduled for Monday and Tuesday this week. Three of the unions openly accepted the government's worthless promise to resolve the pay dispute by the end of the year. The other two unions quickly fell into line, declaring that it was impossible to continue the campaign.

Hundreds of thousands of teachers were preparing to join the strike despite government threats and intimidation. An estimated 200,000 teachers from across the island took part in a one-day strike on September 13 demanding the rectification of longstanding pay anomalies. Teachers angrily told the *World Socialist Web Site* this week that the decision to call off the strike was a gross betrayal by the union leaders.

As is the case for other workers, the pay of teachers has been eroded by sharply increasing prices for basic commodities. The inflation is in part fuelled by government's huge increases in military spending as part of its renewed war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

At a press conference last Sunday morning, leaders of the five unions all stressed their determination to wage an all-out campaign. Ceylon Teacher Service Union (CTSU) president Mahinda Jayasinghe demagogically warned of "more powerful actions" if the government did not remove the salary anomalies after the two-day strike. All his fellow union bureaucrats made similar rhetorical gestures.

That afternoon the same leaders trooped into the office of Education Minister Susil Premajayantha for last minute discussions to avert the strike. Three of the unions—the CTSU, the Educational Professionals Union (EPU) and All Ceylon Teachers Union (ACTU)—emerged jubilant. At a hurriedly-convened press conference, the union leaders explained that they had accepted a government promise after taking the "prevailing situation" into consideration.

The "promise" was nothing new. The education minister had already announced on October 25 an offer to have the pay issue examined by the Salary and Cadre Commission (SCC) and to act on its report by December 31. It is a standard ploy used by governments in the past to divert disputes into the dead-end of a government commission. Up until Sunday afternoon, the five unions had all dismissed the offer.

Well aware of the anger among teachers, the Ceylon Teachers Union (CTU) and Lanka Home Science and Agriculture Diploma Teachers Union (LHSADTU) were reluctant to immediately fall into line. Their leaders told the press that they had refused to accept the promise. In reality, the two unions quietly went along with the decision to call off the strike. Challenged by a Socialist Equality Party member, CTU President Joseph Stalin declared that the two unions "could not go it alone".

Behind the cave-in by the unions is their refusal to oppose the government's communal war. In the case of the CTSU, which is affiliated to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), the reason is obvious. The JVP, an openly Sinhala chauvinist party, supports the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse in parliament. Its only criticism of Rajapakse is that he is failing to wage the war vigorously enough. Its reference to the "prevailing situation" means full support for the government's demand that everything must be sacrificed for the war.

President Rajapakse has flatly rejected the demands of teachers and other sections of workers for increased pay, declaring that the government does not have the money. Last week education minister Premajayantha effectively branded the planned strike as unpatriotic. Teachers, he said, should "not to take trade union action that will affect the morale of the security forces while they are engaged in a task of defending the country and sacrificing their lives in the north and east".

These denunciations were backed by preparations for

police repression. The Inspector General of Police, Victor Perera, directed police stations to collect details about the preparations for protests. The education ministry was ordered to collect information about striking teachers. In at least one province, thugs associated with the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) entered a school and threatened anyone who went on strike. None of the teacher unions even protested these measures.

While the EPU and ACTU have openly backed the CTSU, the CTU and LHSADTU have attempted to distance themselves from the JVP's pro-war stance. The CTU leaders in particular gravitate to the middle class radicals of the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and United Socialist Party (USP), who "oppose" the war, by supporting the so-called international peace process sponsored by the major powers.

The aim of the peace process, which is backed by segments of big business, has been a power-sharing arrangement with the LTTE in order to open up the island as a cheap labour platform. This in no way challenges the ruling elites or the communal politics that they have used for decades to divide the working class. By promoting illusions in such peace talks, the NSSP and USP end up tying workers to one or other faction of the political establishment.

It is no surprise therefore that the CTU called in September for "a broad front" of unions and the NSSP with the right-wing opposition—the United National Party (UNP). The UNP, which was responsible for launching the civil war in 1983, signed the 2002 ceasefire with the LTTE, backed the peace process and held talks with the LTTE. As the war has intensified over the past 18 months, however, the UNP has steadily accommodated to the government's war propaganda and distanced itself from the so-called peace process.

The CTU leaders have followed a similar trajectory. In February, the JVP branded a number of union leaders, including the CTU president, as "Sinhala Tigers"—that is, traitors—for supporting the "peace process". Yet, in the course of the current pay campaign, the CTU has refused to challenge the JVP-aligned CTSU and has opposed any discussion about the impact of the war on pay and living conditions.

The CTU leadership last week barred Socialist Equality Party members, who belong to the union, from attending a meeting of the five teacher unions on the grounds that the SEP would raise "political issues". When challenged as to why the war and its consequences could not be discussed, the CEP president bluntly declared that it was "not

appropriate", adding that "we have different trade unions with different ideas."

The political line up is clear: the CTSU leaders, who support the government's communal war, are permitted to speak freely. But, in the name of unity, the CTU leadership blocks any challenge to the reactionary politics of the CTSU and the JVP. The end result is this opportunist alliance is that the strike has been shut down, permitting the government to continue to spend billions on the war while starving essential public services of money.

The CTSU now declares that it will "organise a struggle" if the government breaks its promise. The CTU, desperate to cover up its own role, has denounced the other unions as "the pets" of the rulers and declared that the "struggle will determinedly be carried forward". All of this is so much hot air. When the government fails to end the present pay anomaly at the end of the year, as it inevitably will, the union leaders will be no more willing to wage a "determined struggle" than they are now.

The crucial issue for teachers is to learn the political lessons of the latest betrayal. Without a campaign to oppose the war, no section of the working class can defend its jobs, conditions and basic rights. The Socialist Equality Party urges all teachers to seriously consider our socialist program to end war and social inequality.

We insist that the first step in building an independent political movement of the working class—Tamil, Sinhala and Muslim alike—is to demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of the military from the North and East. The SEP fights for a workers' and peasants' government—a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam—to completely reorganise society to meet the needs of the majority, not the profits of the few. This must be part of a broader fight for socialism throughout South Asia and internationally.



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