

A socialist program for Sri Lankan teachers' wage struggle

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
10 June 2008

With spiraling prices devastating the living conditions of all workers, thousands of public sector teachers are expected to join Wednesday's and Thursday's two-day sick leave campaign called by three Sri Lankan unions to demand the rectification of salary anomalies.

As long ago as last September, more than 200,000 teachers—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim alike—participated in a one-day strike for the same demand, cutting across ethnic lines and defying communal tensions whipped up by President Mahinda Rajapakse's government to justify its escalating civil war against the Tamil minority.

But the September 13 strike was betrayed by the same unions—the Ceylon Teacher Service Union (CTSU), Educational Professionals Union (EPU) and All Ceylon United Teachers Union (ACUTU)—that have called the current sick-note campaign. In addition, these unions cancelled a two-day strike last October on the basis of a worthless promise by the government to grant their demands by December 31.

The very fact that the teachers' fight has been repeatedly delayed, obstructed and blocked by the unions confirms the warning issued by the Socialist Equality Party on the eve of last September's 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."

It is no accident that the CTSU, which played a central role in betraying the September 13 strike, is affiliated to the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which stridently demands that the war be stepped up, not stopped.

Eleven other education unions have endorsed the sick-day action, under the pressure of rank and file teachers

who are demanding a struggle over wages under conditions where the cost of living has become increasingly unbearable. The sick-note campaign, however, is not even an industrial action—rather it requires teachers to sacrifice two days of their annual sick-leave allowance. The plain truth is that the union leaders stand opposed to calling a strike, because they refuse to oppose the war and the Rajapakse government.

Instead of raising a wages demand, the unions have pushed to the fore the call for abolishing pay anomalies, dating back to 1997, that were created to disadvantage teachers compared to administrative workers in the education service. While the claim would increase monthly salaries by about 5,000 rupees (\$US45), it pits one section of workers against another, when all working people confront similar economic hardships.

Just before the one-day strike on September 13, the union leaders met with President Rajapakse, who bluntly declared that the government could not grant a pay rise because of its financial commitment to the war. When Rajapakse directly challenged the union leaders, asking whether they wanted him to stop the war, not one union leader was prepared to answer.

That conversation bluntly revealed that no struggle, whether by teachers or any other section of workers, can proceed without opposing the war that is being waged to divide, disorient and destroy the fighting capacity of the working class. The Rajapakse government routinely brands anyone who criticises the war effort or raises a voice for democratic and social rights as a traitor and supporter of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Under these conditions the working class cannot take a single step forward without demanding the

withdrawal of the military from the North and East. Only in this way can Sinhala and Tamil working people be unified, along with the oppressed masses, against both the Colombo government and the separatist LTTE, and cut a path to end the war.

No worker can place any trust in the sick-leave campaign or any other campaign initiated by the JVP leaders within the unions. The JVP played a leading role in bringing Rajapakse to the presidency in November 2005, and has supported all his measures against working people. It has voted with the government for every monthly extension of emergency rule, under which innumerable abductions and disappearances have occurred throughout the country. At the same time, the JVP helped the government pass its last budget, which allocated an unprecedented 163 billion rupees for the war, fuelling the rising cost of living.

Because of these policies, the JVP's social base has been shattered and its membership largely washed away. The party's crisis was at the centre of its recent split, in which its former Parliamentary Group leader Wimal Weerawansa led a breakaway faction of 10 parliamentarians. The JVP's pretence of leading campaigns against the rising cost of living is only a desperate attempt to regain some credibility among working people.

The fraudulent character of the JVP's campaigns has been made clear by its demand for a monthly pay rise of 5,000 rupees for public and private workers. According to a recent survey, the estimated minimum monthly expenses of a family of five reached 30,885 rupees by March 31, whereas the minimum wage of a government employee is 11,370 rupees. Even if the demand of the JVP and its unions were granted, it would cover barely half the amount a working class family needs to live. Moreover, since March, bus fares have risen by 27 percent and train fares by 300 percent, while the inflation rate reached 26.2 percent in May, with food and beverage prices soaring by 42.8 percent over the past year.

These conditions are propelling workers into struggles for higher wages, but the unions, which are tied completely to the political establishment and the private profit system, arbitrarily scale down their demands without any democratic consultation and call impotent protest actions that only serve to demoralise

their members.

The teachers' pay struggle cannot be separated from the broader fight against the slashing of funds for public education, and the entire program of economic restructuring, privatisation and public sector cutbacks that has enriched the corporate elite and widened the gulf between rich and poor. In education, these policies have led to the growth of private schools and universities.

Rajapakse's escalation of the war is not only starving public education and every other social program of funding, it is seeking to drown working class opposition to this big business program in communalism and nationalism. Like all its predecessors, Rajapakse's unstable coalition government has responded to rising social unrest by plunging the country back into catastrophic armed conflict.

To fight against the war and the escalating attacks on democratic rights and living standards, workers need an independent political movement based on international socialism. The SEP calls on teachers and all workers to take up the fight for a workers' and peasants' government to completely reorganise society to meet the needs of the majority, not the profits of the few. The working class in Sri Lanka—Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim alike—must unite to fight for a socialist republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam, as part of a union of socialist republics of South Asia and internationally.



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