

Sri Lankan government closes public schools to break up teachers' protest

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In an extraordinary move in the name of “security”, the Sri Lankan government closed down all the country’s 9,714 public sector schools on Wednesday and Thursday in order to sabotage a sick-note industrial campaign by teachers. The teachers’ unions had called the limited protest as a means of avoiding another strike over the demand for a pay increase of about 5,000 rupees (\$US45) per month—a demand that has been outstanding since 1997.

With rampant inflation devastating living standards, thousands of teachers, including principals, were expected to stay away from school for two days. Despite the efforts of the unions to prevent it, the threatened walkout, involving Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim teachers alike, presented a direct challenge to the government’s austerity measures and its efforts to divide the working class along communal lines.

Closing the schools constituted an outright attempt to intimidate the teachers and all working people, under conditions where President Mahinda Rajapakse’s government is demanding further sacrifices of wages and conditions in order to finance its reactionary war against the Tamil minority in the island’s north and the east.

The government insists it has no funds to rectify the long-outstanding salary anomalies affecting teachers. Education Minister Susil Premajayantha told *Lakbima* that 9,600 million rupees would be needed to meet the teachers’ demand. “This is equal to the whole amount allocated for the 1.9 million ‘Samurdi’ families across the island,” he said. (Samurdi is a meagre state welfare program, which gives small amounts to some very low-income families.)

Such a claim is a crude attempt to pit teachers against the poor, when the truth is that the renewal of the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) since 2006 is the real cause of the growing financial crisis.

When 200,000 teachers held a one-day strike for their pay demand last September, President Rajapakse told the teachers’ union leaders: “We do not have money to allocate for this. Do you say that we should withdraw the military from the North and East?” The union leaders completely capitulated and called off a second strike—indicating their abject support for the government’s war effort, and its attempt to offload the full burden of the war on the backs of the working class.

Soaring prices for food, fuel and other essentials in Sri Lanka and globally have now, once again, driven the teachers into struggle. Even if they received a pay increase of 5,000 rupees, that would fall far short of what they need. Even since March, bus fares have risen 27 percent and train fares 300 percent.

Shutting down the schools is also a calculated provocation by the Colombo government to pit students and parents against the teachers, with students ordered to attend school for two extra days in third term to make up for the lost time. Above all, the closure is another bid to create an atmosphere of emergency, in which any opposition to the government can be denounced as a threat to its military campaign against the LTTE.

Education minister Premajayantha declared at a press conference on Tuesday: “In the event the school authorities fail to provide protection to their children, we have to take the sole responsibility for their safety, considering the present security situation in the country.”

In reality, it is the Rajapakse government that has created the greatest security threat to the country’s people by renewing the civil war. The purpose of the war is not only to defeat the LTTE, but to divide the working masses by stoking ethnic tensions between Sinhala and Tamil people. Facing military setbacks in the north of the island, the government has seized upon a series of bomb blasts targeting civilians in recent weeks to increase police powers and other repressive measures that can be used against industrial and social unrest.

The teachers’ union leaders have been prostrate before the government, not daring to call a strike or any public meetings. The government’s decision to close the schools followed a breakdown in discussions between education officials and the unions that called the sick-note campaign—the Ceylon Teacher Service Union (CTSU), Educational Professionals Union (EPU) and All Ceylon United Teachers Union (ACUTU).

The leading union in the campaign, the CTSU, is affiliated to the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). The JVP played a crucial role in bringing Rajapakse to power in 2005, and has been one of the most militaristic parties in parliament. Every month, the JVP has voted for continuing emergency rule and increased military spending, at the expense of essential social services. It frequently brands anyone interfering with the war effort as a “traitor” to the

“motherland”.

After meeting government officials, CTSU general secretary Mahinda Jayasinghe told the *Daily Mirror* that the unions’ primary concern was the government’s financial difficulties. “If the government agrees to a pay hike rectifying these anomalies as a matter of principle, teachers will not mind the decision being implemented in stages given the financial crisis in the country,” he said. In other words, any pay rise to teachers must not affect the government’s war expenditure.

Teachers who spoke to the WSWs called for a struggle to oppose the war and defend living standards. A teacher from Colombo Central School said: “The government’s intention is to sow hatred among parents and ordinary people toward teachers by putting forward the issue of security amid a series of bomb blasts. The government hopes to generate an anti-strike sentiment in society.”

The teacher did not believe that the authorities would address the teachers’ demands, and he had no faith in the capacity of the union leaders to seriously challenge the government. He continued: “As teachers, we are facing many difficult conditions at school. In our school, children are packed in classrooms with limited space. Some text books have not been delivered to students this year even though almost half the year has elapsed. Some classrooms have no lighting facilities. We also face transport problems—we have no public transport.”

The teacher pointed to the need to unify the struggles of the entire working class, regardless of ethnic backgrounds. “The existing rulers depend on whipping up poisonous sentiments such as racialism and religious differences,” he said. “We have to oppose all these sentiments and unite on a common platform, not only as teachers but as workers.”

A 56-year-old teacher from a junior school in Kandy commented: “We have to advance this wage struggle. The government puts the war to the front and advises us not to appeal for anything. I think the war is the means for suppressing the rights of working people. We do not want this war.”

The Kandy teacher expressed opposition to the role of the union leaders. “I do not like this kind of sick-note campaign. In the past, we held strikes to advance our demands. The government will only take advantage of this kind of protest. I do not have any faith in the union leadership—they separate our problems from those of other workers.”

Since 1997, the JVP-led alliance of teachers’ unions has used the demand for “rectifying salary anomalies” to limit and divert the teachers’ struggle for better pay. The “anomalies” demand was brought forward when the government accepted the teaching profession as equal to other professions, such as nursing, and said teachers should be lifted to similar pay levels. However, this decision has never been implemented.

Several other unions, including the Ceylon Teachers Union (CTU) and the Tamil Teachers Union (TTU), have supported the JVP’s protest campaign, while forming a separate alliance

that is critical of the JVP’s communalism and open support for the government. Despite distancing themselves from the JVP, however, the role of these unions in seeking to pacify teachers has been no different.

The CTU joined the betrayal of the teachers’ strike last year. Now CTU general secretary Joseph Stalin has said that the unions would give the government until the end of June to meet their demands, but did not say what the unions would do if the government failed to meet the deadline. When asked by the WSWs, Stalin claimed the school closure was a “victory” for teachers, but did not explain how that could be the case, given the government’s continuing refusal to pay the increase.

A break from these unions is essential in order to unite working people against the Colombo government’s war policy. In a statement on the teachers’ dispute issued earlier this week, the Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) explained: “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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