

Sri Lanka: School principals protest in Colombo over pay claim

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31 March 2009

More than 1,500 public school principals marched and protested outside the Ministry of Education (MOE) in Colombo on March 25 to demand an end to longstanding salary anomalies. The demonstration brought together Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim school heads across the ethnic divide that has been deepened by the government's ongoing communal war.

As part of the protest, 200 principals handed over symbolic resignation letters to press for their demands. In their letters, they call on the education ministry to put them in their previous position as teachers, who receive higher wages than principals.

Backed by a heavy police presence, the officer-in-charge repeatedly threatened the principals with arrest under the country's emergency laws, accusing them of supporting "Tiger terrorists". The principals, members of the Association of Educational Professionals (AEP), ignored the threats and continued their demonstration.

The government has previously exploited its war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to crack down on striking workers and protests by students and farmers, claiming they were aiding the enemy.

About 3,000 school principals—one third of the total number—have threatened to resign if the government does not resolve their problems. The Grade One Principals Union did not support the protest as its higher-level members are not affected. The Grade Three Principals Union, which is affiliated to the ruling

Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), also did not take part.

Protesting principals told the WSWs that they had received no increments since 1991. Their monthly salary has stagnated at between 18,000 to 24,000 rupees (approximately \$US175 to \$225). Some would be entitled to 600,000 rupees in arrears if the increments to which they are entitled were paid. Over the same period, the cost of living index has skyrocketed from 1,131.5 in 1991 to 5,416 in 2007.

School heads have been given extra responsibilities, but fewer funds. Their monthly allowance has been frozen at 500 and 300 rupees according to their grade. Their travelling allowance has also been limited and their entitlement to buy a car tax free ended. To pay day-to-day expenses, most schools depend on donations from well-wishers.

A ministry letter to the union on February 27 noted that cabinet had approved a proposal on the salary anomalies and submitted it to the Public Services Commission in 2007 but had received no reply. The commission oversees the salaries of higher categories of public employees and other administrative matters.

The letter, however, is an evasion. President Mahinda Rajapakse has flatly refused to increase salaries of public employees, including teachers, on the grounds that there is no money because of the huge cost of the war.

Prior to a one-day teachers' strike in September 2007, the AEP along with the Ceylon Teachers Union (CTU) and the Ceylon Teacher Services Union (CTSU) met with Rajapakse over their salary demands. When the

president asked whether they wanted him to withdraw the army from the North and East, none of the unions—including the CTU which claimed to oppose the war—were prepared to challenge him.

An unprecedented 200,000 teachers took part in the one-day protest on September 14, 2007. Incapable of waging a political struggle against the government and its war, the unions adapted to the pressure exerted by Rajapakse and ended any campaign. In October, the AEP and other unions called off a two-day strike on the basis of a worthless government promise to grant their demands by the end of 2007.

The AEP's protest last week was primarily aimed at letting off steam among its members. After handing over the resignation letters, AEP leader Wasantha Dharmasiri emphasised to the media just how moderate his union had been, saying "principals had been patient for 16 years, unlike other government servants". He claimed that another round of talks next month with the education ministry secretary represented a victory.

The government has no intention, however, of granting the demands of school principals or any other public sector workers. Having mortgaged the country to pay for his war, Rajapakse is confronting the worst global economic crisis since the 1930s. Desperate for funds to overcome a chronic balance of payments deficit, the government has been forced to turn to the IMF for a \$1.9 billion loan.

While details of the loan talks have not been released, the government is already signalling its willingness to impose savage austerity measures and the IMF's free-market agenda. Earlier this month, the government passed a bill that sets the stage for the privatisation of the power sector. On March 12, it presented legislation to parliament that will open up tertiary education to private universities.

Last Thursday, government spokesman Lakshman Yapa Abeywardena announced further plans to slash public spending. Last week the Public Services Commission gazetted a series of new measures, including an efficiency test for all public sector workers that opens the door for mass retrenchments. Anyone

who fails the test three times faces dismissal.

School principals and other public sector employees will not achieve their demands by pleading with and pressuring the Rajapakse government, which has already demonstrated that it will not hesitate to use police-state measures against any opposition. Workers can only defend their basic rights and living standards by unifying, opposing the war and building an independent movement based on socialist policies in the struggle for a workers and peasants government.

That is the perspective on which the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is campaigning in the Colombo district for the Western Provincial Council elections.



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