

Sri Lankan government undermines public education

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In a major attack on free education, the Sri Lankan government has launched an island-wide School Development Program (SDP), placing much of the financial burden of running schools on the shoulders of parents.

Every school must establish a School Development Committee (SDC), comprised of teachers, parents, former pupils and education department officials. According to a government circular, each SDC must take “considerable responsibility in realising the expectations of the school”. These responsibilities include management, maintenance and development of school premises, development programs for teachers and curricular affairs. Only the payment of teachers’ wages is excluded.

To finance their activities, the SDCs must seek “state funds, donations by parents, well-wishers’ contributions, hiring of school buildings and land, and earnings by way of sale of products turned out by students in schools”. Even though “state funds” are referred to, the real purpose of this program is to slash government allocations to schools.

The SDP, which began as a pilot project in leading schools in 2006, has been gradually extended to other areas. This year it will cover all schools in Sri Lanka. Under the guise of establishing a “democratic administrative pattern” with “civic participation,” the program will only result in deteriorating conditions. The majority of schools will be unable to obtain adequate funds from poor parents.

The education ministry has claimed that establishing the SDCs will deepen the dedication of the “beneficiaries”—the students and their parents. This reference to “beneficiaries” amounts to the rejection of any conception of education as a fundamental right—a right of immense social significance for which the working class has fought for generations.

In 1944, N.M. Perera, the imprisoned leader of the

Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), then a Trotskyist party, wrote a pamphlet, *A case for free education*. He articulated demands for full free education funded by the state, and argued that this right could be established only under socialism. In order to head off the rising demand among workers, intellectuals and young people for free public education, a United National Party (UNP) government was forced to grant free school education in 1944, a concession that was later expanded, contributing to the country’s high literacy rate.

After introducing pro-market policies in the late 1970s, the UNP sought to liquidate free education. In 1981, it published a “White Paper on Education” that proposed school management committees, with parents responsible for seeking funds to run schools. Mass opposition forced the withdrawal of the plan, but public education has been eroded ever since.

Following the launching of the civil war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1983, expenditure on education and welfare was sharply cut and diverted to finance the military mobilisation. Government spending on education has decreased from 4 percent of GDP in 1981 to 2.1 percent of GDP in 2010.

Now facing a protracted economic crisis due to years of heavy war expenditure, compounded by the global recession, the Rajapakse government is preparing a massive cut to social spending, including education. In line with the debt-repayment demands of the International Monetary Fund, last year’s budget outlined plans to cut the deficit sharply to 6.8 percent of GDP this year and 5 percent next year.

Already, the Sri Lankan authorities have for years coerced parents into making donations to cover school costs. Some affluent National Schools are able to obtain funds from parents, and children are denied admission if their parents cannot afford to contribute.

Commenting to the *Island*, deputy education minister

Vijithamuni Zoysa claimed that “it was not mandatory for parents to be involved in maintaining the schools of their children” under the new program.

A Colombo housewife told the WSWS that was not true. She said the situation had changed over the years, effectively compelling parents to make donations. “At the beginning of this year, my son’s teacher asked him to bring 7,000 rupees (\$US65) to colour wash the class room, paint the furniture, purchase the learning aids, and so on. All the parents were compelled to pay the sum in order to avoid unnecessary problems.”

She spent 150,000 rupees as an entrance fee for her daughter to attend an elite public school. Unable to afford such high payments, many parents become deeply indebted.

A teacher in a poor school in Colombo described the other side of the story: “I had to collect 200 rupees from each student for colour washing the class room. Some students stayed at home since they couldn’t afford that. We can’t continue this way. The new program will worsen this situation.”

The children of the urban and rural poor have suffered the most. Due to the lack of funds and shortages of teachers, 664 public schools closed between 1997 and 2007. Thirty five percent of schools in Sri Lanka have less than 10 teachers—126 schools have only one teacher while 324 schools have just two teachers.

A teacher from a rural school in the central hill district explained: “There are 230 students in our school and classes are conducted up to Grade 11. Because of the lack of teachers and facilities, Advanced Level classes had to be abandoned. We collect money from poor students to do essential work.” In 2008, the education ministry degraded the school to a junior level, covering only grades 1 to 9. However, the ministry had to withdraw the decision due to a campaign launched by the students, teachers and parents.

The school has had no teachers for English, physical training and aesthetics subjects since 2004. The teacher added: “The government claims that all schools have been provided with computers, but we didn’t get one. Conducting English medium classes as an island-wide project was introduced in 2005. How could we conduct classes without English teachers?”

The teacher unions, which have kept silent since the SDP project was introduced in 2006, are now trying to preempt the anger of working people, teachers and students over this latest imposition.

Ceylon Teachers Union (CTU) leader Joseph Stalin told

the WSWS he opposed the program. All he has done, however, is to write letters to the education minister pleading for him to withdraw the current circular. After paving the way for the program to be implemented across the whole country, Stalin claimed the union now hoped “to launch a massive campaign in the future demanding the withdrawal of the circular,” after discussion with other unions.

The Ceylon Teacher Services Union (CTSU) has launched a petition campaign against the project. The CTSU is affiliated to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which backed the government throughout the war against the LTTE, insisting that teachers, and all working people, should sacrifice for the war effort. CTSU secretary Mahinda Jayasinghe told the WSWS that the union’s petition to Rajapakse demanded “immediate withdrawal of the circular.” He added: “At the same time we demand a full assurance for the right of free education [from President Mahinda Rajapakse].”

The JVP is promoting the fatal illusion that through a petition campaign or other protests, working people can pressure the government to withdraw its plans. The JVP and its trade unions are conducting similar protest campaigns over wages and the government’s attacks on basic democratic rights.

The role of both the CTSU and CTU in blocking struggles by teachers was displayed when 200,000 teachers held a one-day wage strike in 2007. Rajapakse bluntly told the union leaders that the government did not have the money to allocate for a pay increase. He asked: “Do you say that we should withdraw the military from the North and East?” The union leaders immediately capitulated.

The unions are once again on their knees, appealing to Rajapakse to relent so that they can head off a movement by teachers, parents and students. They are hostile to the necessity of a political struggle against government aimed at independently mobilising workers, teachers and young people in the fight for a socialist perspective.



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