

Sri Lankan university teachers demand pay rise

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23 May 2011

Despite mounting threats by the government, Sri Lankan university teachers have embarked on industrial action to demand a substantial pay increase. Lecturers and professors resigned en masse from administrative positions on May 9, crippling many university functions, and have resolved to boycott the GCE Advanced Level examination scheduled for August.

Sri Lankan academics are among the poorest paid in Asia, with monthly salaries as low as 20,700 rupees (\$US190) for a junior lecturer and 57,000 rupees for a professor. They have not received a rise since 1996, and in 2006 the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse cut their academic allowances from 30 percent to 25 percent of their monthly salary.

The Federation of University Teachers Association (FUTA) has called for a “dignified salary increment” in monthly salaries of up to 200 percent. It is also urging the creation of a special professional category for university teachers and the trebling of the budgetary allocation for education from 2 percent to 6 percent of gross domestic product.

In a bid to crush the campaign, the government has instructed universities to withhold May’s salaries from all those taking part—an estimated 90 percent of the country’s 4,000 university teachers. Ministry of Higher Education Secretary Sunil Jayantha Navaratne also declared that “those who resigned from all voluntary posts would not be offered any position in the university system in future”.

Academics have resigned as heads of department, faculty coordinators, hostel wardens and student counsellors. They have not withdrawn from conducting

lectures, but their protest action means that the universities cannot function properly.

Most students are sympathetic to the teachers’ struggle. Over the past year the government has also increased its repression of students, seeking to suppress opposition to the privatisation of university education and deteriorating conditions on campuses.

Since 2008, the government has repeatedly rejected the academics’ pay claims, despite two one-day strikes, last August and in March. FUTA chairman Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri told the media that union officials met Higher Education Minister S.B. Dissanayake on April 17, seeking an “effective response” to their demands, but to no avail.

Dissanayake falsely claimed that the government had increased salaries by 36 percent in the 2011 budget. The budget rise was just 5 percent of basic salary, with other increases in research and study allowances.

The union has unsuccessfully appealed for talks with President Rajapakse. Instead, at a weekly meeting with newspaper editors on May 10, Rajapakse attacked the academics’ protest as “politically motivated”, without elaborating.

Rajapakse revealed the government’s actual concerns when he stated that if the increase were awarded to university lecturers, other sections of the public sector would demand a similar pay hike. The government is acutely aware of deepening resentment among workers, both public and private, whose wages have been effectively frozen since 2006 despite soaring food and living costs.

Committed to International Monetary Fund austerity

measures, including deep budget cuts, the government is not about to concede wage rises. As in other countries, the government is intent on restructuring economic and social conditions to impose the full burden of the global economic crisis on the working class.

Dissanayake claimed that “some groups may attempt to use the strike by university academic staff to destabilise the government and gain support for the UN report on Sri Lanka”.

The reference to the UN report, which documents the war crimes of the government and the military committed in the final months of the country’s protracted civil war, is intended to intimidate the academics. The government claims that the report is part of an “international conspiracy” to undermine its grip on power and slander the military.

Despite the government’s aggressive stance, the FUTA leaders are looking for a compromise. Speaking to the *Daily Mirror*, Dewasiri reiterated the union’s willingness to “engage in a negotiated settlement”.

From the outset, the FUTA has appealed to the government on the basis that, far from being political, its campaign is essentially in line with the government’s own economic program. The union has declared that granting its demands would represent a victory for the government’s efforts to “transform Sri Lanka into the next Asian miracle in the next five years or so, making it a knowledge hub in the region”.

The government’s slogan of making Sri Lanka an Asian miracle has nothing to do with improving the conditions of working people. It is a strategy based on turning the island into a cheap labour platform and commercial centre for big business and foreign investors. The “knowledge hub” concept is aimed at attracting private foreign universities, as well as overseas fee-paying students.

The government is deliberately running down public universities as part of its efforts to privatise university education, a policy that the FUTA has not publicly opposed.

Several teachers spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the problems they face, and the general decline in university education. One lecturer explained: “To get a 25

percent research and development allowance you have to submit a research paper. This must be approved by a board and you must carry out the research without obstructing your duties. Actually, you can’t do this without taking leave.”

Another lecturer said that during the 1950s and 1960s, there was a pro-intellectual and cultural environment in university education, and academics had conducted very valuable research with the participation of students. “Now we can’t do the research since our salary is not enough even for day-to-day expenses. Students are now trained just for exams. As a result, they gradually drift from their own studies and become dependent on the notes of lecturers.”

Together with the students, academics are facing poor conditions, including crowded lecture halls, and a lack of staff, laboratories, adequate libraries and other facilities. The lecturer explained: “In many universities, there are no quarters for lecturers. We have to pay big house rents to live decently.”

The government’s threatening response to the academics demonstrates that they will not be spared from Rajapakse’s assault on the living conditions and democratic rights of students and working people. Against the FUTA’s determination to strike a deal with the government, university teachers must organise independently on the basis of an opposed political perspective.

Billions of rupees must be allocated to develop the education system. But this cannot be achieved within the profit system. University teachers must forge a unified movement with students and the rest of the working class, guided by the fight for a workers’ and farmers’ government to implement socialist policies as part of the struggle for international socialism.



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