

Defend Sri Lankan university teachers

The International Students for Social Equality (Sri Lanka)
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International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) in Sri Lanka calls on students to defend the right of university teachers to fight for a decent wage rise and improved conditions.

University academics quit their administrative posts as heads of department, faculty coordinators, hostel wardens and student counsellors on May 9 as part of their protest campaign for higher wages.

The Appeal Courts issued an interim order on May 30 blocking the resignations after three pro-government students from the Ruhunu, Sri Jayewardenepura, and Wayamba universities filed legal petitions. There are moves to file similar cases against teachers at other universities.

On June 9, the Appeals Court rejected a plea by the Federation of University Teachers Associations (FUTA) to withdraw its interim order. Instead, the court extended it until June 30. If teachers do not heed the order, and refuse to carry out administration duties, they could face serious contempt of court charges.

The government of President Mahinda Rajapakse is notorious for using court orders against workers taking industrial action. In 2007, school teachers boycotted the marking of GCE -Advanced Level exam papers as part of a pay dispute. The government obtained a Supreme Court order that exam marking should not be interrupted. On that basis, police arrested a number of teachers who refused to take part in the marking. When the trade unions refused to defend the victimised teachers, the entire campaign fizzled out.

The government is now determined to suppress the university teachers' protest, fearing it has the potential to encourage other sections of workers to demand pay

raises to compensate for high inflation.

Sri Lankan academics are among the poorest paid in Asia, with monthly salaries as low as 20,750 rupees (\$US190) for a junior lecturer and 57,500 rupees for a professor. They have not received a pay rise since 1996. The FUTA has called for a “dignified salary increment” in monthly salaries of up to 200 percent and increased education spending.

Over the past three weeks, union leaders, including FUTA president Ranjith Dewasiri, have met with President Rajapakse and senior education officials in the vain hope that they can be pressured into granting a pay rise. The government, however, has rejected the wage demand outright, saying it was unaffordable.

Last July, amid student protests, the government sang a different tune. Higher Education Minister S.B. Dissanayake told parliament that the monthly salary for senior lecturers would be increased from 57,755 to 200,000 rupees, and for junior lecturers from 20,750 to 72,000 rupees.

The government had no intention of keeping its promise. Rather its purpose was to divide university teachers from students, who were demonstrating against the privatisation of higher education and deteriorating conditions in public universities.

Using anti-democratic legislation, university authorities—backed by the government--suspended classes and arrested dozens of students involved in the protests. The Rajapakse regime has since imposed compulsory military “leadership training” on new university entrants in a bid to stifle further political opposition.

Having suppressed the student protests, the government has turned on university teachers, reneging on its promised salary increase. Students must oppose the legal assault on university lecturers and demand decent pay and conditions as part of a broader campaign to defend public education.

The low salary of university teachers is a symptom of the crisis of the entire education system in Sri Lanka. Students, teachers and non-academic employees all face poor conditions in the universities—crowded classrooms, inadequate facilities and a lack of staff.

Moreover, the deterioration of universities and schools is part of a broader offensive against the living standards of working people across the board. The Rajapakse government is carrying out the dictates of the International Monetary Fund to slash public services and implement pro-market restructuring.

Other sections of the working class are under attack. Late last month, the government deployed thousands of police and soldiers to suppress protests by workers in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone against its new pension scheme, which is designed to help investors and speculators.

Governments around the world are carrying out the demands of finance capital in heaping the burden of the world capitalist crisis on the working class. Struggles have erupted in Europe, US and the Middle East against these attacks.

Public education and healthcare have been placed on the chopping block to turn them into profit making industries for investors. The Sri Lankan government has already discussed giving the green light for foreign private universities. By defeating the teachers' campaign and suppressing students, the government is seeking to proceed rapidly. This must be defeated.

That is why, while supporting the wage struggle, the ISSE emphasises that teachers and students need a political program to fight the government's attacks on public education and democratic rights.

Last Sunday, FUTA president Dewasiri admitted that

discussions with government officials had ended without a “satisfying solution”. His response, however, was to propose another protest—a boycott of advanced level exam evaluations—to try to put more pressure on the government for a compromise.

The Inter University Student Federation (IUSF)—affiliated with the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—has issued a statement supporting the FUTA campaign. Like FUTA, the IUSF has no perspective for politically challenging the government. Instead, it supports the union's protest tactics.

All those insisting on attempting to pressure the government are fostering dangerous illusions. To satisfy the global financial markets, Rajapakse has no choice but to implement the demands of the IMF and will not hesitate to use police-state measures against workers and youth. His government relies on the unions and opposition parties to block any broad political struggle for a socialist alternative.

What is needed is a turn by students and teachers to sections of the working class to build an independent political movement to fight for a workers' and peasants' government to implement a socialist program. Billions of rupees are needed to provide free, high quality education for all and proper wages and conditions for teachers.

This is the perspective for which the ISSE fights, alongside the Socialist Equality Party. We call on students to study our program and build ISSE branches in every university.



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