

Sri Lanka: University teachers union sells out wage campaign

Kapila Fernando
30 July 2011

On July 22, the Federation of University Teachers Association (FUTA) called off its three-month protest campaign for a pay rise, accepting the limited allowance increases proposed by the government.

University academics had resigned their administrative posts on May 9 as part of their protest campaign for higher wages. The FUTA leadership took the decision to terminate the wage campaign because it was adding to the political problems of the government and it became clear that the pay demands could not be won without a political struggle.

Speaking to the WSWS, FUTA president Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri stated: “Our basic salary has not been increased. The increase is just in the academic and research and development allowances.” Assistant lecturers would not receive any increase, he acknowledged.

The government has doubled the allowances for a section of university lecturers to allow union leaders to claim to the membership that they have gained something.

The union first demanded a pay rise of up to 168,000 rupees [\$US1,500] a month for senior professors. However, after the government rejected the demand, the union slashed it to 132,000 rupees and then to 126,000 rupees. Similarly, the union cut its demands for other categories of lecturers.

Now the union has accepted the government’s offer to only increase allowances, raising the total salary for a senior professor to 115,000 rupees. The increase amounts to just 15,000 rupees for a senior professor and 1,500 rupees for a probationary lecturer. There was no rise in the Employment Provident Fund or gratuity on retirement.

President Mahinda Rajapakse repeatedly rejected any

pay rise for university lecturers. On July 13, Rajapakse along with Treasury Secretary P.B. Jayasundera and Higher Education Ministry Secretary, Sunil Jayantha Nawarathne, made the government’s final proposal for an increase in allowances. The union leaders, preparing to call off any action, declared this was a “positive response” from the president.

The FUTA executive committee called off the union campaign and falsely told the media that members would get the majority of their demands.

Dewasiri openly admitted that the union abandoned the protest for political reasons. He told the WSWS: “We had to agree to the government’s proposal. Both parties could not go beyond that. The government is firm that they cannot increase salaries any further. We cannot go beyond this as a trade union. If we go forward then we would have to struggle with a political perspective like yours (the Socialist Equality Party). But we feel that it is not a suitable situation for such a fight. It is very difficult get an agreement from the membership for such an action.”

FTUA leaders, including Dewasiri, blamed the membership for their conscious decision to call off the protests in order to try to hide their own political subservience to the Rajapakse government.

From the beginning of the limited campaign, it was clear that the pay hikes and other demands could not be won without a political struggle against the Rajapakse government.

At the outset, Rajapakse rejected the lecturer’s demand for a pay hike as “unbearable” and claimed if it were granted then the university non-academic staff and other government workers would make similar demands. At a meeting with selected media editors, Rajapakse exclaimed: “Do you ask me to print money and increase salaries [of university teachers]?”

There has been no salary increase for university lecturers since 1996 and public employees' salaries have been frozen since 2006.

When workers demanded salary increases during the civil war against separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Rajapakse menaced the unions, saying: "Are you asking me to stop the war and increase the salaries?" The unions bowed down to the government's threat and abandoned their pay demands.

Now the government is heaping the combined burden of huge debts from the war and the impact of global economic crisis onto the backs of working people. The suppression of public sector wages is part of an austerity program designed to meet the demands of the International Monetary Fund to slash the budget deficit and implement pro-market reforms. The government's decision to start privatising university education is another feature of these measures.

While the unions refused to wage a political campaign against Rajapakse, the government strenuously opposed the protest actions. It warned university teachers they would not be reappointed to administrative posts that they had relinquished. Pro-government students tried to obtain court orders to stop teachers from resigning from these posts.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) explained that to defend living conditions and to oppose university privatisation, teachers and students should turn to the working class and fight for a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies.

Union leaders Dewasiri and Sumanasiri Liyanage, a political science professor at Peradeniya University, claimed that there was a solution within the capitalist system. At a meeting in Colombo on June 20, Liyanage proclaimed that "the wage struggle will be won definitely." He declared: "Social welfare ideas have been undermined by the market policies... the government does not know how to line up economic policies according to priorities."

Following Liyanage, Dewasiri said "a struggle should be waged against neo-liberalism for the social development and social justice." He then told the university teachers that their wage struggle was not "against the government."

The ex-radicals, Liyanage and Dewasiri, once

claimed to fight for "socialism" but today they have come forward to block any fight against the government and to claim that social justice can be established under capitalism. Their sell-out of the wage campaign is a direct consequence of their politics.

The union made no appeal to workers and students who were sympathetic to their campaign. Instead, hoping for a compromise with the government, it turned to the opposition United National Party (UNP) and several partners in the ruling coalition, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), the Stalinist Communist Party and the communalist Peoples United Front (MEP), and held a meeting with these parties on June 26. All of these organisations support the IMF's austerity agenda.

Wickremabahu Karunaratna, the leader of the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), backed the FUTA leaders even as they were preparing the betrayal. Shamelessly, Karunaratna participated in the meeting held on June 26, reinforcing the lie that pressure could force the government to concede the demands of university teachers.

We urge university teachers and students to seriously consider the political lessons of this struggle, to break from the capitalist parties and the straitjacket of trade unions and to join the struggle of the SEP and its student organisation, the ISSE, in order to build a socialist movement of the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact