

Sri Lankan ex-left justifies betrayal of university pay campaign

K. Ratnayake
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Facing criticism from university teachers, the Sri Lankan ex-left, Professor Sumanasiri Liyanage, recently used his column in the right-wing *Island* newspaper to justify the betrayal of a protracted pay campaign by the Federation of University Teachers Association (FUTA). Liyanage was the chairman of FUTA's negotiating team with the government and declares himself to be the "victim of a slanderous campaign."

In his article on July 24, Liyanage wheels out the stock excuses employed by trade union officials to justify their treachery. He lists the "successes" of the negotiating team, declaring that it secured an increase in the monthly salary of a senior professor to 115,000 rupees (\$US1,370)—a 17,000-rupee rise and, according to him, 17,000 rupees less than FUTA was demanding. "As far as the salary demand was concerned, it was not a total victory for FUTA; but no one could argue it is a total defeat either."

Even on this level, Liyanage is engaged in double dealing. Previously the monthly payment for senior professors consisted of a base salary of 57,000 rupees and an additional 40,000 rupees in allowances, making a total of 97,000 rupees. FUTA's campaign was focussed on demanding a rise in the base salary to 135,000 rupees, which according to its arithmetic would bring the overall payment to 168,000 rupees.

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse flatly refused any salary increase—as he has done throughout the public sector. Liyanage and his negotiating team accepted the government's position and, after nearly three months of campaigning, finally foisted on teachers the government's offer of a 17,000-rupee increase in allowances. As a result, the overall payments to senior professors increased to 115,000 rupees—more than 50,000 rupees short of FUTA's demand. Moreover, by increasing allowances rather than the base salary, the government also avoided increasing various retirement benefits. Other teaching categories suffered accordingly, with assistant lecturers receiving no increase at all.

That, however, is only the beginning of Liyanage's duplicity. As he acknowledges, the campaign was not just about a salary

increase. The FUTA demands included: pay parity for Sri Lankan university teachers with those throughout South Asia; the recognition of university teachers as a special professional category; restoration of facilities taken from university teachers five years ago; and an increase in state spending on education to 6 percent of gross domestic product.

However, as Liyanage explains in his column, the FUTA leadership was never serious about fighting for these demands. "Accepting the fact that these demands cannot be met fully overnight, FUTA presented a minimum set of demands seeking immediate solutions," he declares. In other words, even before the fight had begun, FUTA substituted its own "minimum set of demands," which it failed to disclose to its members.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) insisted from the outset that university teachers confronted a political struggle against the Rajapakse government. We warned that the government was under pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to slash public spending and implement pro-market restructuring, including steps toward privatising university education. Rajapakse refused to countenance any public sector wage increases precisely because he has to slash the budget deficit to 5 percent of GDP by 2012—half the 2009 level.

Liyanage makes clear, however, that the union never had the slightest intention of challenging the government. He dismisses accusations that FUTA was planning "regime-change," saying the union had no "hidden agenda." He writes: "So at the very beginning, we were well aware that we had to deal with the present government and not with a government that may come in a distant future."

Moreover, as Liyanage admits, the union had no real disagreements with the government. "We did not consider the negotiators of the government as enemies," he states. "We made them aware that we understood their own problems in addressing the issues at hand." Rendering his betrayal more profound, the professor claims to have discovered a new negotiating principle—"communicative negotiation... based the Habermasian principle of communicative rationality"—that

“provides lessons for other social movements.” He plans a lengthy academic article on the topic.

In reality, Liyanage is simply seeking to hide the union’s abject political capitulation to the Rajapakse government. Even a fight for the limited demands publicly stated by FUTA put university teachers on a collision course with the government and IMF. An exasperated Liyanage exclaims in the course of his column: what else could we have done! The answer is the one advanced by the SEP—turn to other sections of workers who are facing the same problems and seek to mobilise them independently in a struggle for a workers’ and peasants’ government based on a socialist program.

Such a perspective was flatly rejected by Liyanage and the FUTA leadership as impossible. FUTA did not turn to other layers of the working class, including public sector workers who are now in struggle. Instead, the union turned to sections of the Colombo political establishment, notably the so-called “left” parties of the ruling coalition—the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, the Communist Party and the Sinhala communalist Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP)—in a bid to dupe union members into believing that the government could be pressured to make concessions.

FUTA’s betrayal was not simply the product of rotten individuals. The unions in Sri Lanka and internationally have undergone a fundamental transformation under the impact of the globalisation of production. Previously, the unions, operating within a nationally regulated economy, bargained with employers for limited reforms to contain any movement of workers. Today they function as the industrial policemen for the bourgeoisie as it seeks to make every aspect of the economy, including higher education, “internationally competitive.”

Nor would a more militant struggle guided by the same perspective have produced different results. The events of recent days have graphically demonstrated that the breakdown of global capitalism that erupted in 2008 is deepening. The agenda of international finance capital in every country, including Sri Lanka, is to claw back all the previous hard-won gains of the working class. The only viable perspective is one based on a revolutionary struggle to abolish capitalism.

It is here that former radicals such as Liyanage play a particularly pernicious role. The professor trades on his association with the LSSP, which was a Trotskyist party in the early 1950s, but politically degenerated and openly betrayed the principles of international socialism by joining the bourgeois government of Sirima Bandaranaike in 1964. Liyanage not only remained in the LSSP after its betrayal but when it joined a second Bandaranaike government in 1970 and implemented

anti-working class, communal policies.

Liyanage only broke from the LSSP when it had earned the hostility of the overwhelming majority of the working class. Far from altering his opportunist course, he became one of the founders of the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) in 1978, which, as the name implies, continued the LSSP’s politics of class collaboration under a new name. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Liyanage lurched further to the right, declaring that the “accepted socialism” of Marx was “outdated” and had to be replaced by a new “liberal socialism” to work toward a “reasonable” capitalism. He subsequently drifted out of the NSSP, but maintains cosy relations with its leaders.

In his column, Liyanage claims that he is still a communist, saying “yes there were not many communists in the FUTA struggle. I am glad to put myself in this rare category.” And, he invokes the name of Lenin to cover his treachery. He cites a 1922 essay entitled “On Ascending a Mountain” in which Lenin explains that there are times when communists are compelled to retreat before reaching their ultimate goal—the mountain peak—but they do not give up, and begin over and over again in approaching an extremely difficult task.

The comparison is a ridiculous one. Lenin was writing as a revolutionary Marxist of the immense economic and political difficulties confronting the first workers’ state that had just emerged from civil war and was isolated after the defeat of revolutions in Europe, particularly Germany. Liyanage, on the other hand, is writing of a union official who has just sold out an important, but limited struggle. Moreover, within that context, he and the FUTA leadership were completely opposed to waging a political fight against the Rajapakse government on the basis of socialist policies.

Like every union official, Liyanage blames FUTA members for his own treachery—there were too few communists in the FUTA struggle. The chief problem facing university teachers, who were prepared to fight, was that there were no genuine socialists able to wage a determined political struggle, above all against the chicanery of Liyanage and the FUTA leadership. University teachers and students should draw the necessary lessons, make a careful study of the SEP’s program and join and build the SEP as the mass revolutionary party of the working class needed to wage the fight for socialism.



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