

Sri Lankan unions betray university workers' strike

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3 March 2012

Strikes over wages by almost 15,000 non-academic workers at 13 Sri Lankan universities and related institutions were shut down on Thursday by the Trade Union Joint Committee (TUJC), after it accepted a flimsy promise from Higher Education authorities. Non-academic workers across Sri Lanka, including from the North and East, were involved in the walkout, the second strike in the past two weeks.

The TUJC is made up of union officials from the ruling party-controlled Sri Lanka Independent Employees Union (SLIEU), the Inter University Services Trade Union (IUSTU)—which is affiliated to the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—and various so-called independent unions.

The joint committee's demand was for an immediate 25 percent pay rise for non-academic employees as part of the rectification of salary anomalies. The purpose of the union campaign was not to defend workers' living standards, however. It was to dissipate growing anger over the government's austerity measures. The unions have consistently betrayed industrial action by non-academic workers over salary anomalies for the past 15 years.

Following a two-day strike last week, the TUJC called another walkout on Wednesday, declaring that the campaign would continue indefinitely until the demands were met in full. Nevertheless, on Wednesday afternoon, union bureaucrats met with the Higher Education officials and told angry members the next day that the authorities had promised to resolve the issue by March 21.

IUSTU secretary Wijethilaka Jayasinghe attempted to cover up the blatant sell-out, declaring that the strike "was not called off but suspended." Other union officials sought to divert workers' anger, claiming they had won an 11 percent salary increase, a figure nowhere near the original demand. Moreover, there is no guarantee that non-academic employees will ever receive this amount. Government officials have also insisted that workers' salaries will be docked for going on strike.

When Dehin Wasantha, a non-academic worker and member of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), attempted to expose this betrayal at the Moratuwa University mass meeting, union officials denied him the right to speak and launched a provocation. At the instigation of TUJC bureaucrats, an SLIEU thug physically attacked Wasantha. SLIU branch secretary Asantha De Mel also threatened anyone attempting to defend Dehin and his right to address the meeting. The anti-democratic assault was endorsed by Ashoka Chandana, a JVP leader.

The unions were well aware that Dehin would expose their sordid manoeuvres and win a favourable hearing from non-academic employees. A day earlier, Dehin addressed a mass meeting of striking Moratuwa University workers, explaining the economic and political crisis facing Sri Lankan workers and why the Rajapakse government was imposing the International Monetary Fund's austerity measures.

The source of this social assault, Dehin said, was the world capitalist crisis, combined with the huge cost of the government's disastrous war against the Liberation

Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Sri Lankan workers and poor would face further depreciation of their wages, job losses and the slashing of subsidies, he said.

“No solution can be expected from the government of capitalists,” Dehin told the meeting. He called on university workers to mobilise as part of an independent working-class movement based on an international socialist perspective and the fight for a workers’ and peasant’ government.

Dehin denounced the nationalist and opportunist program of the TUJC and the opposition parties, and called on workers to form their own independent action committees. If workers remained under the domination of the unions, he continued, they would again be betrayed. These warnings are vindicated by the historical record.

The struggle to rectify salary anomalies dates back to 1997. Non-academic workers have launched numerous campaigns over the past decade and a half to win this demand. In August 2003, they held a 22-day strike, the following year they walked out again and in 2005 they struck for a month. In 2007 non-academic workers went on strike once more, this time for two weeks. The unions betrayed each of these struggles, persuading employees to return to work on the basis of hollow promises from the university authorities and the government.

When the Rajapakse government renewed the war against the separatist LTTE, the unions backed the military conflict, shutting down or blocking all industrial action. This time, the unions have caved into the government’s patriotic campaign against current US threats to move a resolution in the UN Human Rights Council over human rights violations committed during the long-running war against the LTTE.

The government’s campaign is an attempt to deflect the mounting opposition of urban and rural workers and the poor against the price hikes. Thousands of fishermen have already taken part in protests against the fuel price rises. On February 15, police opened fire on protesting fishermen in Chilaw, killing one and wounding three others.

The TUJC, like other Sri Lankan unions, functions as the industrial police for the government and big business, and is desperate to prevent a nationwide struggle against the government by non-academic university workers over wages.



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