

Non-academic university staff strike in Sri Lanka

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Thousands of non-academic staff at Sri Lankan universities stopped work yesterday as part of an indefinite strike to demand an immediate 25 percent pay rise as part of their campaign to rectify salary anomalies. The strike follows a two-day stoppage on May 22-23 that involved non-academic employees from 13 universities and 26 related institutions across the island, including in the North and East.

Yesterday's strike was called by the Inter University Trade Union Joint Committee (IUTUJC), which includes unions affiliated to the opposition parties—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and United National Party (UNP)—as well as several so-called independent unions. While part of the IUTUJC, the union that is connected to the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) did not participate in the strike.

The demand for an end to salary anomalies stretches back to 2004, when a government report proposed to rationalise pay scales for non-academic employees. The issue has become all the more pressing now as the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse has slashed price subsidies, triggering soaring inflation.

The government and the University Grants Commission have treated the union demands with contempt. Higher Education Minister S.B. Dissanayake postponed several meetings with IUTUJC officials then finally cancelled all discussion.

Non-academic employees have effectively had their wages frozen and have not even been paid an allowance that was promised in the last budget speech. Nevertheless, speaking to picketing workers last month, IUTUJC co-president R.M. Chandrapala praised

President Rajapakse for “allocating money through the budget of 2012 to rectify the salary anomalies.”

The unions are directly responsible for the continuing pay anomalies. They have betrayed one struggle after another over the past decade. After a 22-day strike in 2003, a UNP-led government referred the case to the Sri Lanka Institute of Development Administration (SLIDA) to investigate. SLIDA recommended that the pay of non-academic staff be increased in line with other university salaries, but the government rejected the recommendations.

In September 2004, non-academic workers again walked off the job to demand a 2,500-rupee monthly allowance, pending the implementation of the full recommendations. The union officials shut down the strike in return for a 1,000-rupee allowance. At the time, the JVP was part of the coalition government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga that was implementing the pro-market restructuring dictated by the International Monetary Fund.

In July 2005, non-academic university workers stopped work for a month over similar demands but their struggle was sabotaged by the JVP-led Inter University Services Trade Union. The JVP had just quit the Kumaratunga government and was waging a chauvinist campaign against the government's P-TOMS plan to jointly manage tsunami relief funds with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The University Services Trade Union insisted that workers end their strike action in order to boost opposition to the P-TOMS agreement.

The JVP backed Rajapakse to win the 2005

presidential election and fully supported his government's decision to restart the protracted civil war against the LTTE in 2006. The union movement as a whole subordinated the working class to the government's war drive.

Calling off another strike by non-academic staff in May 2007, IUTUJC co-secretary H.P. Ariyapala declared that the unions had no alternative, "taking into consideration the government's monetary and other difficulties." The union leaders used the same excuse—"the prevailing situation in the country"—to shut down industrial action the following month.

The "prevailing situation" was Rajapakse's communal war, and the "monetary difficulties" referred to the government's huge military spending at the expense of essential services such as education, health and welfare.

The Rajapakse government's war, which resulted in the killing of tens of thousands of Tamil civilians and gross abuses of democratic rights, ended in May 2009 with the military defeat of the LTTE. Far from opening up a new period of peace and prosperity, however, the government is now demanding sacrifice for "economic development" and "nation building."

In education, the government is pressing ahead with privatisation, opening up key sectors of university education to foreign and local investors. As part of this restructuring, non-academic positions in universities, including security, gardening and transport, have been already partially outsourced. The overall workforce has been reduced from 13,000 to 10,000 over the past three years through the non-replacement of retiring workers.

The pay cuts and increasing workloads for non-academic workers are bound up with the government's pro-market agenda. As is the case in Europe and around the world, Rajapakse is implementing the demands of the financial markets to impose the burden of the world capitalist crisis onto working people through austerity measures.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) fully supports the non-academic workers' strike but warns that the unions

will betray this struggle. The unions and the political parties to which they are affiliated have no fundamental differences with the government's policies and promote the illusion that Rajapakse can be pressured to make concessions.

Workers must reject the perspective of begging the president for handouts and instead wage a political struggle against the government and the profit system it defends. This can only be done through a complete break with the unions. Action committees should be formed in every university and a turn made to other sections of workers in Sri Lanka and internationally facing the same attacks.

The working class must be armed with a socialist perspective to replace capitalist rule with a workers' and peasants' government to reorganise the economy so it is run not for private profit but for social needs. This task requires the unification of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers, independent of all sections of the bourgeoisie, together with their class brothers and sisters throughout the region and internationally.

The SEP is the only party fighting for this program in the working class in Sri Lanka and South Asia. We call for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the struggle for socialism throughout South Asia and internationally. We urge striking workers to seriously study our perspective and to apply to join and build the SEP as the new mass revolutionary party needed to lead the struggles of the working class.



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