

Sri Lankan unions betray university workers' strike

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The Inter University Trade Union Joint Committee (IUTUJC) has shut down a strike by non-academic staff at Sri Lankan universities, without achieving any of its demands. The strike, for an immediate 25 percent salary increase and the rectification of salary anomalies, began on June 5, dragged on for three weeks, and was ended on June 26.

The IUTUJC includes unions affiliated to the opposition parties—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the United National Party (UNP)—as well as several so-called independent unions. While a part of the IUTUJC, the union associated with the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) did not participate in the strike.

Joint Committee leaders boasted at the start of the strike that they would make no compromise with the government and the university authorities. They would stand for “an indefinite strike” until the demands were met. This was hot air designed to hoodwink striking workers. From the outset, the unions indicated their willingness to reach a deal with the University Grants Commission (UGC) and government officials.

The unions held two rounds of discussions with the UGC and the Treasury, as well as another three sessions of talks with Labour Department officials. Contrary to the reality, the impression conveyed to the strikers by the union leaders, all the while, was that a favorable outcome was about to be reached.

While the discussions were continuing, Higher Education Minister S. B. Dissanayake arrogantly declared that he was not ready for talks with strikers, and ordered them to immediately return to work. He

also threatened to withhold the salaries of workers for the strike period.

The unions began to signal a sell-out. IUTUJC co-president R.M. Chandrapala told the media at the end of the second discussion with the Labour Department that the unions were ready to “reconsider” the demand for a 25 percent pay increase.

Ultimately the union leaders signed a collective agreement with the UGC. IUTUJC media spokesman Wijetilleke Jayasinghe, one of the signatories, claimed that the UGC had agreed to issue a circular within 45 days promising to rectify the salary anomalies. There was no mention of the 25 percent salary increase or the minister’s threat to cut pay for the strike period.

Once again, the IUTUJC has betrayed workers for a cheap promise to address pay anomalies—in the future. This is from a government that is notorious for breaking its promises.

The government’s refusal to increase the pay of non-academic staff is part of the broader austerity program being dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Wage rises are being suppressed, even as the government has lifted prices on fuel, food and other essentials, and slashed social spending.

For nearly a decade, the IUTUJC, which is bitterly opposed to any political struggle against the government, has betrayed one struggle after another on the wages issue.

When non-academic workers walked off the job in September 2004, demanding a 2,500-rupee monthly allowance, the union officials shut down the strike in return for a 1,000-rupee allowance.

In July 2005, when workers struck again over similar demands, their struggle was sabotaged by the JVP-led Inter University Services Trade Union (IUSTU). The IUSTU insisted that workers end their industrial action in order to focus on the JVP's communal campaign against the joint management of tsunami relief funds by the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

In May 2007, the IUTUJC called off another strike because of "the prevailing situation in the country"—in other words, that workers had to subordinate their interests to President Mahinda Rajapakse's renewed war against the LTTE.

From the beginning of the latest strike, Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warned that workers could not win their demands without a political struggle against the Rajapakse government.

An SEP statement explained: "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, President 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 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."

The SEP urged workers to break from the unions and wage their own independent struggle. This required the establishment of Action Committees, independent of unions, in work places and neighbourhoods.

In this political fight, the working class must be armed with a socialist perspective to end capitalist rule and establish a workers' and peasants' government to reorganise society on the basis of meeting social needs, not private profit. This task requires the unification of Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim workers, independent of all sections of the bourgeoisie, as well as with their class brothers and sisters throughout the region and internationally.

From the outset, the unions were utterly hostile toward such a political struggle. When the SEP campaigned among the workers at Peradeniya and Ruhunu universities, union leaders and their supporters threatened SEP members and prevented them from

continuing their discussions.

At the University of Moratuwa, union leaders of all colours joined together to use physical violence against the present writer, who defied the threats and addressed striking workers at meetings several times.

The workers as a whole must draw the necessary lessons from this betrayal. Without a complete break from the union apparatus and the turn to a socialist perspective, it is impossible for the working class to take a step forward. We urge non-academic staff and other sections of workers to seriously study the SEP's program and to join and build it as the new mass revolutionary party of the working class.



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