

Sri Lankan government shuts universities to break strike

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28 August 2012

On August 21, Higher Education Minister S. B. Disanayake ordered the closure of all Sri Lankan universities, except for medical faculties, in an effort to break the nearly two-month-old university teachers' strike.

About 4,000 teachers in 14 universities and other higher education institutions have been on strike since July 4, demanding a 20 percent pay rise, improved university facilities and an increase in education spending from 1.8 percent to 6 percent of gross domestic product. This is the third strike called by the Federation of University Teachers Associations (FUTA) since May last year, amid growing opposition among academics to the government's rejection of their demands.

In a media release, Disanayake reiterated the government's oft-repeated accusation that the FUTA had a "hidden political agenda". He said the strike sought "to create instability and a political crisis leading to a regime change, we guess." This was a thinly-veiled threat that the government would use even more draconian methods to suppress the teachers' campaign.

Even though Sri Lankan university teachers are the lowest paid in South Asia, the minister categorically rejected a pay rise. He claimed that the government had awarded salary increases of 36 to 83 percent through allowances and payments. However, these payments are not included in salaries and are not counted when calculating pension entitlements.

Speaking in parliament, Disanayake bluntly declared

that "we cannot increase salaries." He made no mention of the demand for higher education spending. He stated that any salary rise "may create many discrepancies and anomalies in the national salary structure, creating other repercussions."

This reflects the government's fear that other sections of workers will push their long standing wage demands, which have been suppressed with the help of the trade unions.

President Mahinda Rajapakse's government froze wages, with the support of the unions, during the war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and diverted billions of rupees into the war effort. Then, after defeating the LTTE and obtaining a loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in June 2009, the government imposed austerity measures, including a continued wage freeze, privatisation and increased prices for fuel and other essentials.

As well as slashing budget allocations for education, the government has deliberately allowed the state university system to deteriorate, in order to push an agenda of privatising higher education. This attack on the right to free education is part of an overall assault on the working class and poor.

The government prepared a bill to privatise tertiary education but faced widespread opposition from university students and academics. It unleashed a witch-hunt against students, via the so-called Anti-Ragging Bill of 2010, which attacked the democratic right of students to protest. University authorities dissolved student unions on several campuses. Hundreds of students were suspended, and scores arrested.

Further demonstrations erupted in recent months after the government denied places for eligible students to enter universities. In response to the protests, the higher education ministry postponed the admission of new entrants. It also cut back English and IT proficiency courses for new students.

More than 2,000 university teachers and students marched and rallied in Colombo last Thursday after the government shut down the universities. However, FUTA leaders and other speakers opposed any fight to overturn the government. Instead, the union is now seeking to end the strike, as it has before, on the basis of flimsy promises from the Treasury.

Indicating the FUTA's hostility to any political fight against the government, union president Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri declared: "The winning of our demands is not in any way an overthrowing of the government."

The rally featured discredited trade union bureaucrats, as well as outright supporters of the government and the right-wing United National Party opposition. Speakers included Ceylon Mercantile Union leader Bala Tampoe and Ceylon Teachers Union leader Joseph Stalin, who have helped betray previous struggles for wage increases and other demands.

Another FUTA leader, Dambara Amila Thera, said he had supported the government in 2005, but had joined "a fight like Nandikadal" with teachers and students. "Nandikadal" was a reference to the government's forces' final offensives against the LTTE, in which tens of thousands of innocent Tamils were killed. The FUTA's embrace of such right-wing forces only serves to divide workers along communal lines and obscure the political issues at stake.

FUTA leaders have held futile discussions with Dissanayake, the president's secretary Lalith Weeratunga and Economic Development Minister Basil Rajapakse, the president's brother. FUTA president Dewasiri told the media that talks with Rajapakse on Tuesday were "fruitful" and there was a possibility that the strike would be called off this week.

FUTA leaders were scheduled to meet Treasury

Secretary P.B. Jayasundera last Friday to obtain a "written promise" from him, in order to end the strike. This supposed undertaking to meet some of the strikers' demands was meant to appease union members.

Jayasundera did not call the union leaders on Friday, however, and gave no reason. Even if such a letter were issued, it would only be to provide FUTA with a pretext to betray the strike. The government's record is one of repeatedly breaking such promises. Confronted by deepening economic and political difficulties, it has instead resorted to police-state methods to crush any resistance to its policies.

University teachers and students should reject the FUTA's attempts to betray the strike and their demands. They form their own independent action committees and turn for support to other sections of workers on the basis of a fight for a workers' and peasants' government and socialist policies. This is the only means for defending the rights of students to free, high quality education and university teachers and employees to a job with proper pay and conditions.



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