

# Support the struggle of Sri Lankan university teachers

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)  
25 September 2012

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and its student movement, the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE), wholeheartedly welcome the widespread public support given to striking university teachers. Their demands for better pay and conditions have struck a chord throughout the working class, which is being hard hit by the government's austerity measures.

The SEP calls on workers and youth to take action of their own to back the teachers as part of the broadest possible campaign to defend living standards. This necessarily involves a political struggle against the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse and the Colombo political establishment as a whole. We warn that the leaders of the trade union involved—the Federation of University Teachers' Associations (FUTA)—are fundamentally opposed to such a perspective and, as a result, will capitulate to the Rajapakse government and sell out the strike.

The strike has already lasted two and a half months. Two long marches to gather public support are currently underway from the cities of Galle and Kandy, to culminate in a rally in Colombo on Friday. The university teachers are fighting for a 20 percent wage increase, the allocation of 6 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) to public education and an end to university privatisation.

The basic question arises: Can these demands be realised under the Rajapakse government or any other capitalist government? The answer is obvious: the Sri Lankan government, like its counterparts around the world, is seeking to impose the burdens of the global economic breakdown onto the backs of working people.

President Rajapakse has already frozen the wages of all workers, even as the value of the rupee is falling, higher taxes are being levied on consumer goods, and price subsidies are being slashed, along with essential social services. In the field of education, 150 schools have been already closed, while the state universities have been deprived of the necessary funds to recruit teachers, build lecture rooms, laboratories and library facilities.

Far from making concessions to university teachers or any other section of the working class, the Rajapakse government intends to accelerate this austerity agenda, in line with the demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The major opposition parties—the United National Party (UNP) and Janatha Vimukti Peramuna (JVP)—have no fundamental disagreement with making the working class pay for the crisis of capitalism.

The FUTA leaders, however, promote the dangerous illusion that Rajapakse can be pressured to grant the demands of university teachers. FUTA president Nirmal Devasiri told *Lakbima* last weekend that his discussions with government officials, including the president's brother—Economic Development Minister Basil Rajapakse—had been very “cordial.” As university teachers know only too well, this is the same government that has rejected their demands for more than two years.

FUTA insists that as a “privileged section” of the working class, university teachers can win their demands without the support of other workers. The union leaders refuse to call for support from non-academic workers and university students, let alone

from other layers of workers facing similar devastating attacks on their living standards.

FUTA is leading striking teachers down the same path that ended in the betrayal of last year's protracted pay dispute. After a campaign lasting nearly three months, FUTA accepted a limited salary increase that fell well short of the original claim and simply jettisoned its other demands—including to lift public education spending to 6 percent of GDP.

The government has made clear there will be no concessions. Higher Education Minister S.B. Dissanayaka has boasted that the government could crush the strike in no time. This is no idle threat. The government has not hesitated to use the police and military against striking and protesting workers in the past.

Despite the FUTA leadership, a movement of working people has begun to emerge to back the university teachers and their defence of public education. It is precisely at this point that the opposition parties—the JVP and the UNP—along with the treacherous old working class leaderships—the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and Communist Party (CP)—and the pseudo-radical organisations—the New Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and United Socialist Party (USP)—have appeared on FUTA platforms to “support the struggle.”

The SEP warns university teachers: these are false friends. These parties have intervened to support the FUTA leaders, not the striking teachers and the working people who are supporting them. The LSSP and CP are partners in the Rajapakse government and are responsible for its austerity program. The JVP and UNP have both been members of governments that have imposed the pro-market agenda.

The most treacherous role is being played by the ex-left groups—the NSSP and USP—which are in a de facto alliance with the right-wing UNP. They will direct their political fire in particular against the SEP and ISSE, which is the only party fighting to mobilise the working class independently of all factions of the capitalist class on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.

The SEP calls for the formation of action committees, independent of the trade unions, at every university, involving the non-academic staff and students, and among other sections of the working class.

Decent wages and free high-quality public education are basic rights, not only for teachers, but for the working class as a whole. These rights will be won only through a broad political struggle for a workers' and farmers' government to implement socialist policies. Society must be restructured from top to bottom to meet the needs of the majority of working people, not the profits of the wealthy few.

We call upon all those who agree with our program to join the SEP and build it as the mass revolutionary party of the working class.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**