

Sri Lankan union prepares to sell out university strike

Our correspondents
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A five-day protest march of striking university teachers and their supporters from the southern city of Galle to the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo ended last Friday with a rally of about 4,000. The marchers attracted considerable support for their demands of a 20 percent pay rise and an increase in government spending on education to 6 percent of gross domestic product.

School teachers, students, workers and housewives gathered along the way to greet the marchers. One mother from Galle told the WSWS: “We support this protest. To resolve the crisis of education, expenditure for education should be increased to 6 percent.” Another woman blamed the government for not resolving the crisis of education and condemned the arrogance of ministers toward the teachers. A school student explained: “Due to the lack of funds for schools, our parents are forced to shoulder the financial burdens, but they can’t do it.”

The sympathy of working people toward the protest reflects deep-seated anger and hostility over the austerity agenda being implemented by the government at the dictates of the International Monetary Fund. The working class as a whole is being hit by pay freezes, rising prices and cutbacks to essential social services such as education and health.

The Federation of University Teachers Associations (FUTA) organised the march, however, not to mobilise workers and the rural poor against the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse, but to let off steam as the union moves to sell out the three-month strike.

The government has repeatedly made clear that it will

make no concessions to the strikers. During the march, Higher Education Minister S.B. Dissanayake accused the university teachers of being part of a conspiracy aimed at “regime change”—in other words, changing the government.

But FUTA president Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri told the rally last Friday that “the struggle of university teachers is not to defeat anyone.” The refusal of the FUTA leadership to wage a political struggle against the Rajapakse government is the surest sign that the union is about to betray the protracted strike. Dewasiri declared that the union was seeking another discussion with Treasury Secretary P. B. Jayasundera, even though the minister has ruled out any compromise.

FUTA vice president Dambara Amila, a monk and a member of the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), told the rally: “[T]eachers must prepare for more demonstrations, more hunger strikes and even fast unto death in front of the universities.” Such demagogic appeals for militant action are simply designed to obscure the sell-out that is being prepared behind closed doors with government ministers and senior officials.

The Rajapakse government’s austerity measures are part of an international agenda by finance capital to make the working class pay for the deepening global economic crisis. This onslaught on living standards can be fought only through the independent mobilisation of workers and the rural masses against the government and the capitalist system that it defends.

Far from turning to the working class, the FUTA leadership has turned to other trade unions, opposition

parties and ex-left organisations that have no fundamental disagreement with the government's austerity policies. Previous United National Party (UNP) governments and the coalition government that included the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) were all responsible for implementing attacks on public education.

The pseudo-left organisations—the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and the United Socialist Party (USP)—have stepped forward to present the opposition parties as a genuine alternative for working people. The NSSP and USP are part of a “united opposition alliance” with the UNP, a right-wing bourgeois party that was responsible for initiating the program of pro-market restructuring in the late 1970s, including the privatisation of education and slashing expenditure on welfare and other essential services.

During the march, the USP issued a leaflet calling for a one-day protest strike to support the university teachers' strike, defend free education and demand a 12,500-rupee monthly wage for all workers. These demands, however, were made as a futile appeal to the UNP, JVP, various Tamil capitalist parties and the trade unions.

A second march of university students from Kandy in support of the teachers' strike also arrived in Colombo last Friday but did not join the teachers' rally. The protest was organised by the Inter University Student Federation (IUSF), which is affiliated with the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP)—a breakaway organisation from the JVP.

IUSF convenor Sanjeewa Bandara attempted to strike a radical posture by telling the protest that the IUSF would not participate in a joint meeting with the UNP, which supported the establishment of private universities. But the FSP and IUSF are also seeking to divert students and university teachers into the dead-end of appealing to the Rajapakse government for concessions.

An editorial in the FSP magazine *Janarala* bluntly opposed the struggle to mobilise working people on the basis of socialist policies, arguing instead: “Ultimately,

we want to force the government to intervene to solve the issue, demonstrating at least the ‘minimum’ morality that a capitalist government can show.” The reality is that there is nothing that capitalist governments in Sri Lanka or any other country will not do when it comes to imposing the burden of the economic crisis on working people.

There are other sharp warning signs that the FUTA leadership is about to betray the struggle of university teachers. Last weekend a FUTA delegation, including Dambara Amila, met with the top Buddhist prelates in Kandy to urge their support for the union's demands.

Asked whether a compromise was possible, Amila indicated that the union would support the proposals made by Economic Development Minister Basil Rajapakse. This minister, however, offered nothing more than agreement to “FUTA demands in principle”—a common ploy to grant nothing more than talks into the indefinite future.

The FUTA delegation also made clear that it did not expect the government to allocate 6 percent of gross domestic product to education “overnight.” In reality, the union never had the slightest intention of fighting for such an increase in education funding. It is preparing to dump this demand, as it did during its sellout of last year's pay dispute.

University teachers are at a crossroads. If the strike is left in the hands of FUTA, it will be sold out. The alternative is to form rank-and-file action committees at every university and turn to other sections of working people facing similar attacks. That requires the fight for a workers' and peasants' government and socialist policies, including free, high quality education for all and decent pay and conditions for teachers.



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