

Sri Lankan union sells out three-month university strike

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The Federation of University Teachers Associations (FUTA) in Sri Lanka has betrayed a three-month long strike, caving in to government pressure on Thursday. The strike was called off without achieving any of the academic staff's demands.

About 4,000 teachers from 14 universities took part in the industrial action that began on July 4. They demanded a 20 percent wage rise and an increase in government spending on education to 6 percent of gross domestic product (GDP).

After a series of closed-door meetings with cabinet ministers and education officials, FUTA officials accepted the government's worthless "assurances". The union claimed that a letter written by Treasury Secretary P.B. Jayasundera ensured the finance ministry's commitment to the teachers' wage demands. His letter, however, merely stated that "the government will give due consideration to address remuneration-related concerns expressed by FUTA ... within a 5-year medium term framework commencing from 2013 budget."

This letter is consistent with the stance taken by President Mahinda Rajapakse's government since the beginning of the industrial campaign, and commits it to nothing. Moreover, it made no assurances whatsoever about increasing public education expenditure.

FUTA president Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri and other union officials initially agreed to participate in a joint press conference to announce the deal, alongside Economic Development Minister Basil Rajapakse, the president's brother, and Higher Education Minister S. B. Dissanayake. However, expecting bitter opposition among academics, a section of the union's executive committee decided to hold a separate media conference in an obvious

attempt to avoid appearing too close to the government.

Dewasiri nevertheless signed a joint statement with Basil Rajapakse that made clear the union had sold out the strike in return for a more central role in implementing the government's right-wing tertiary education "reforms".

The joint statement endorsed the Rajapakse administration's goal of "making Sri Lanka a hub of knowledge of South Asia"—a phrase that serves as a cover for the promotion of private universities. The document referred to university faculty boards and senate committees helping approve the provision of "university resources for the usage of private institutes."

Similarly, the government-union statement insisted that the university bodies would determine the form of new "Leadership Training"—a compulsory four-week military training course for new university students that the government announced last year.

Union president Dewasiri admitted that the teachers' demands had not been met. But he insisted that the government's admission that there were problems in the education sector was a "most important achievement". He added that the submission of a cabinet memorandum proposing recognition of university academics as a distinct professional category marked "a victory".

The union bureaucrat shamelessly praised Basil Rajapakse. "I do not hesitate to thank Minister Rajapakse," he declared, for providing an "opportunity to have a serious discussion".

Dewasiri indicated that the FUTA leadership had never been serious about the demand for increased education spending. The union president declared the demand had

merely been “symbolic” and did not “form the crux of trade union demands during discussions”.

The *Nation* reported Dewasiri as saying that a trade union action “cannot go on forever” and had to end with a “compromise”. He added that there were “two dimensions” to FUTA’s campaign—the trade union action, that had ended, and a “mass campaign” for higher education spending, that was ongoing. FUTA spokesman Mahim Mendis declared: “This is not a permanent exit but a temporary suspension of a historic struggle. We will continue with greater determination and expect the government to fulfil what they had agreed to.”

The agreement reached between FUTA and the government is not a compromise, but a complete capitulation by the union. Likewise FUTA’s claim that the “historic struggle” has only been suspended is a lie, aimed at defusing the widespread hostility among FUTA members to the sellout. The union leadership, hostile to the democratic rights of the university teachers, has not even placed its deal before the union membership for a vote in favour or against.

The so-called opposition parties all stand exposed by the FUTA sellout. All of them—ranging from the United National Party, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna and the Frontline Socialist Party, to the ex-lefts of the Nava Sama Samaja Party and the United Socialist Party—supported the union bureaucracy during the strike. Virtually all of them remained silent since the betrayal.

The only exception has been JVP secretary Tilwin Silva who in an interview with *Lankadeepa*, justified the betrayal and the union’s failure to take a vote of members. “We all know that a strike cannot go forward indefinitely,” he said. Silva insisted that there was no alternative but to surrender to the government in the face of its threats.

From the outset of the strike, the FUTA leadership, and the political parties that backed it, did everything possible to prevent the emergence of a political struggle against the government.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) repeatedly warned university teachers and other workers about the role being played by the union. A statement issued on September 25, “Support the struggle of Sri Lankan university teachers”

explained:

“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 SEP pointed out that the demands of university teachers could not be realised under the Rajapakse administration or any other capitalist government. Rajapakse and his colleagues, like their counterparts around the world, are ruthlessly implementing an austerity agenda aimed at making the working class bear the burden of the global economic crisis.

The SEP urged teachers to take their struggle out of the hands of the FUTA leadership, organise rank-and-file committees and turn out to other sections of the working class facing attacks on jobs, wages and conditions. As with other social and democratic rights, teachers’ demands will be won only through a broad political struggle for a workers’ and peasants’ government committed to implementing socialist policies.



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