

The political lessons of the Sri Lankan university teachers' strike

Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
14 November 2012

Thousands of Sri Lankan university teachers stopped work on July 4 and continued their action for 100 days—one of the longest strikes on the island in more than three decades. The stoppage was part of the rising tide of working-class struggles around the world as workers seek to defend their social and democratic rights against the universal demand of finance capital for austerity.

As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) consistently warned during the strike, the Federation of University Teachers Associations (FUTA) shamelessly betrayed the struggle without winning any of the demands, which included a 20 percent wage rise and the lifting of public education spending to 6 percent of gross domestic product (GDP). The union leaders sent the teachers back to work on the basis of empty government promises to consider the demands in the future. A month after the end of the strike, the promises have all but been forgotten.

The political lessons of the strike are of crucial importance to workers, in Sri Lanka and internationally, in order to prepare for the inevitable class struggles ahead.

From the outset, the teachers were confronted with the necessity of a political fight against the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse which, under conditions of a worsening economic crisis in Sri Lanka and globally, is implementing the agenda of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for privatisation and deep cuts to government spending, including education.

The FUTA leaders were bitterly opposed to such a struggle. Despite its militant posturing, the union adamantly rejected government accusations that it was seeking “regime change”—that is, the bringing down of the government.

The union only called the strike in the face of mounting frustration and anger among university teachers over the continued erosion of their pay by inflation, and the government's cutbacks to education spending. The FUTA leaders advanced the most unrealistic perspective of all—that the Rajapakse government could be pressured to make concessions to university teachers when capitalist governments around the world are imposing the agenda of austerity.

From the beginning, the government vehemently opposed giving anything to university teachers. Higher Education Minister S. B. Dissanayake ruled out a pay rise and dismissed an increase in education spending as unviable. He threatened to sack all teachers who took part in the strike.

The teachers from across the island were not intimidated, however, and continued their stoppage. As the strike dragged on, the FUTA leadership became desperate for a way out. Its previous betrayals had left the membership suspicious and potentially hostile.

In a bid to end the impasse, FUTA and the Inter University Students' Federation launched two marches—from Galle in the south, and Kandy in the centre, to Colombo. As far as the union was concerned, the marches were a stunt to let off steam. But the demand for an increase in education spending from 1.8 percent to 6 percent of GDP—something that the union never took seriously—struck a chord with workers and the rural poor in the villages and towns through which the teachers marched.

Popular support gathered for the march as working people saw university teachers taking a stand against the social counterrevolution being carried out by the

Rajapakse government against every aspect of the living standards of working people. The FUTA leadership, in league with the opposition parties and the Buddhist hierarchy, sought at every point to ensure this support did not turn into a political movement against the government.

FUTA promoted the lie that the opposition parties are defenders of public education. But the right-wing United National Party (UNP) is responsible for initiating the privatisation of education, and along with the Democratic National Alliance of the former army commander Sarath Fonseka, is committed to the IMF's austerity program. The ex-lefts of the Nava Sama Samaja Party and the United Socialist Party are allied with the right-wing UNP. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna and its recent breakaway group, now named the Frontline Socialist Party, were partners in 2004-05 in a coalition government headed by Rajapakse's Sri Lanka Freedom Party that implemented pro-market policies.

The strong public support for the marches provoked concerns in both the government and the union leadership, which quickly came together to shut down the campaign. Economic development minister Basil Rajapakse, one of the president's brothers, was assigned to hold talks with the FUTA leaders, who were anxiously looking for a way to end the strike. Just two weeks after the end of the marches, on October 12, FUTA accepted the government's phony promises and called off the struggle.

So determined were union leaders to end the strike that FUTA president Ranjit Devasiri declared that he would stand by the agreement with the government, "even at the risk of facing a no-confidence motion in the union." At many university campuses, teachers voted overwhelmingly to continue the strike against the decision of the FUTA leaders. The union held no mass meeting or vote to ratify the sell-out deal. Devasiri later admitted: "It was a more difficult task to end the strike than to begin it."

In reality, the union functioned all along as industrial policeman for the government, limiting the scope of the action, blocking any political fight against Rajapakse and ultimately selling out the strike. While the government has refused to abide by its promises, FUTA leaders are implementing their side of the deal, including participating in the mechanisms established to privatise

universities and backing the government's military training for first year students.

University teachers as well as students and working people more generally have to draw the necessary conclusions from this critical experience. Like trade unions in every country, those in Sri Lanka have been transformed and no longer in any sense defend even the most basic rights of the working class. In conditions of global economic breakdown, they have become the mechanism for imposing the burden of the crisis on the working class.

The working class cannot defend even its most minimal social and democratic rights except on the basis of a revolutionary socialist perspective. The starting point of any struggle has to be a complete break with the trade unions and a political fight for the independent mobilisation of workers, and behind them the rural poor, for a workers' and peasants' government. The Socialist Equality Party calls for the formation of independent action committees in workplaces and neighbourhoods as the means for turning out to broad layers of working people on the basis of a socialist program.

The struggle for socialism to abolish capitalism is necessarily international in scope. The SEP fights for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as an integral part of the struggle for a United Socialist States of South Asia and the world. We call on teachers, students and workers to study our perspective and to join and build the SEP, the Sri Lankan section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, as the new revolutionary leadership of the working class.



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