

Sri Lanka university workers maintain indefinite strike as union backtracks

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6 March 2018

More than 15,000 non-academic workers from 15 Sri Lankan state universities are continuing an indefinite strike they began on February 28. The workers are demanding a 20 percent wage rise, a language proficiency allowance, increased concessionary loans, the introduction of medical insurance and a pension scheme.

The University Trade Union Joint Committee (UTUJC) called the strike under pressure from members who are increasingly restive over its backpeddling in response to the government's refusal to grant workers' demands.

UTUJC chairman Edward Malwattage told Higher Education and Highways Minister Kabir Hasim last week that the strikers have threatened to withdraw their voluntary services at farm maintenance, research and medical facilities, and university laboratories, and other daily mandatory services.

The striking workers walked out over the same demands almost two years ago, in July 2016. The trade unions, however, called off the strike after 12 days, claiming they had received a written agreement from the University Grants Commission (UGC), the administrative body of state universities.

After the "agreement" was exposed as an empty promise, the UTUJC organised token strikes this year, on January 25 and February 6 and 7, to let off steam and deflect mounting opposition among union members.

On February 6, thousands of workers protested outside the UGC in Colombo as union leaders held discussions with UGC chairman Professor Mohan de Silva. When de Silva responded by threatening to make any future strike illegal, the UTUJC announced the February 28 walkout, while working behind the scenes to avert the strike.

The Sri Lanka University Technical Officers Union (SLUTOU) immediately moved to prevent unified action. Moratuwa University branch leaders called a meeting on February 23, declaring they had decided to break from the UTUJC because they were denied co-chairmanship of the committee and would not participate in the proposed strike.

Dehin Wasantha, a Socialist Equality Party (SEP) member and well-known among the SLUTOU membership, opposed this betrayal and demanded the union participate in the national walkout. He was supported by a majority of members and a meeting resolved to join the strike from March 2.

UTUJC leaders told strikers they would contact "friendly ministers" within the government and win their support for workers' demands. UTUJC treasurer K. L. D. J. Richmond said: "Two unions which are representing the government parties can be fruitfully involved in the discussions with ministers."

The two unions to which Richmond referred are affiliated to President Maithripala Sirisena's Sri Lanka Freedom Party and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP). Another union, controlled by the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), is backing the moves by other unions to derail the strike.

UTUJC Colombo University branch secretary R. P. G. D. Herath announced that the union alliance had called off a planned March 2 protest march in Colombo, declaring it was confident there would be a positive response after Hasim assumed his duties as the new higher education minister.

Hasim was appointed the minister on February 25, after President Sirisena and Prime Minister Wickremesinghe made some cosmetic changes to the cabinet, following defeats in recent local government

elections. The changes were another desperate attempt to hoodwink the population.

The government is fully committed to the social austerity program demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and will continue to slash expenditure, including for education and limited welfare subsidies, and push for the privatisation of state-owned corporations.

These measures include boosting private universities, imposing fee-paying courses at state universities, refusing to fill university staff vacancies and cutting temporary and contract positions.

The UGC chairman's threat to ban the strike action is not a personal one, but in line with the government's use of police-state measures, including essential services orders and the deployment of the military to suppress strike action.

The craven appeals of the UTUJC and its false claims that the government can be pressured to grant workers' demands are a political trap. The government's refusal to increase pay for non-academic workers is of a piece with its blanket opposition to wage rises for power, postal and railway workers, to name just a few.

The non-academic workers' struggle is a part of a widening working class struggle. Power workers are currently holding protest pickets throughout the country, demanding wage increases and opposing the political victimisation of their union leaders.

The university workers' strike reflects a growing radicalisation of the international working class, expressed in the struggle of West Virginia teachers in the US, who have rejected their union's rotten deal with the state government.

Last week, as the WSWs spoke with striking workers, Indika Diddeniya, secretary of Colombo university's laboratory assistant's union, intervened, declaring that the union "expected a progressive response" from the minister.

When challenged by a WSWs reporter, who said the new ministerial appointment did nothing to change the government's policy, Diddeniya retreated and demagogically declared: "A change of minister is not a big deal for us. We only believe in our struggle. That's why we launched this indefinite strike."

The WSWs reporter pointed out the treacherous record and role of the trade unions and explained the Socialist Equality Party's call for the establishment of

"action committees" independent of the trade unions.

On hearing this discussion, Asanka Heenkenda, a laboratory worker, voiced his agreement with the WSWs reporter. When the government initially granted a small wage increase, he said, many workers thought it was a relief. "However, the cost of living has gone up dramatically," he said. "We can't cope with the situation and the fight to win demands is imperative."

Many workers who spoke with the WSWs rejected union claims that government ministers are sympathetic to workers. A striker from Jaffna University said: "The new minister is a minister of this government, which is responsible for everything. This is an act of cheating us."

A Moratuwa University worker commented: "How many ministers in this and the previous governments presented us with fake promises? When this minister presents us with a letter, the union leadership boasts about it. It is better to quit the unions rather than being members."

A University of Peradeniya striker said: "We have no confidence in the union leadership. They tried to postpone this struggle several times but couldn't do it because of the determination of membership to win their demands. The union leadership only wants to protect their positions and ranks. They have no intention of winning our demands."

Striking UTUJC members must reject all attempts by the union leadership to end their industrial action. They should take the initiative to establish action committees, independent of the trade unions, reach out to other workers and develop unified action for a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies in opposition to the IMF's austerity measures.



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