

Striking non-academic workers picket Sri Lankan universities

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Thousands of non-academic workers, who have been on strike since February 28, picketed their universities on Tuesday to protest the Sri Lankan government's refusal to address their demands.

Almost 16,000 workers from more than 15 state universities and other higher education institutions walked out two weeks ago for a 20 percent wage rise, a language proficiency allowance, increased concessionary loans and the introduction of medical insurance and a pension scheme.

While the strikers have shown their determination to continue and expand their industrial action, the University Trade Unions Joint Committee (UTUJC) is limiting the strike and insisting that it is possible to pressure the government and higher education authorities to make concessions.

The union alliance, which has made no criticism of the government, is attempting to cover up the political issues raised by the strike, despite the fact that the government and the education authorities have refused to discuss the workers' demands.

From the outset, the UTUJC leadership insisted that the newly-appointed Higher Education Minister Kabir Hasim would give a "positive response" to the workers' claims.

The union alliance also appointed a co-president from one of its affiliates that is controlled by the United National Party (UNP), the government's main coalition partner. This decision, UTUJC officials claimed, would help to facilitate discussions with the UNP leader, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, and other senior ministers.

The government, which faces a deep economic crisis and is implementing austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund, is determined not to allow any pay rise or grant the demands for medical

insurance and pensions. It is relying on the union alliance to shut down the industrial action.

Addressing Moratuwa University employees on Tuesday, UTUJC branch leader K.M. Srisirsenana said the union had not called for the picketing of all universities because it had to take into account "the country's situation." He did not explain this "situation" or its political implications.

The union official was alluding to the anti-democratic state of emergency the government declared on March 6 after anti-Muslim riots by extremist-right Buddhist groups in parts of central Kandy. The government claimed that the state of emergency would last a week, but it still remains in place.

UTUJC treasurer K.L.D.J. Richmond told about 200 employees picketing the University of Colombo it was "regrettable" that the government had not held any discussions with the union. He declared that it was "the first time that the university unions faced such a situation."

Mounting anger among the strikers forced the UTUJC to announce this week that its members would not maintain "essential services" on the campuses. This includes farm work, looking after animals and maintaining laboratories.

Other non-academics have also joined the strike. Members of the university executive staff union decided to support the industrial action and placed bans on "additional work." More protests will be held on Friday.

The UTUJC, like its union counterparts throughout Sri Lanka, opposes joint industrial and political action against the government, fearing that the unions would lose control of any united struggle.

From the beginning of the non-academic workers' dispute, Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and

International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) members have intervened with an internationalist and socialist program.

On Tuesday, SEP and IYSSE teams campaigned at several universities in Colombo and its suburbs, distributing hundreds of copies of a party statement on the dispute and outlining the political tasks facing the striking workers.

The SEP statement explained: “The issues in the non-academic workers strike are common in every class struggle: falling wages, declining social infrastructure, the onslaught on free education and growing social inequality. The entire working class, therefore, should come forward to defend and support the non-academic workers’ struggle and regard it as their own struggle.”

The statement warned that non-academic workers place no trust in the UTUJC but fight for the development of independent action committees of workers to take the struggle out of the hands of the trade unions. “Such committees should be elected by the workers and every decision should be taken through democratic discussions.”

An IYSSE statement also appealed to youth and students, explaining that in order to fight the government’s attacks they had to “unite with the striking non-academic workers.”

The UTUJC leadership denounced these statements. At Jayawardenapura University, the branch leadership was hostile to the SEP statement, particularly the section warning strikers not to place “any trust in the UTUJC.”

SEP and IYSSE campaigners pointed out the perfidious role played by the unions in the past period. One campaigner explained: “These struggles cannot proceed without a political fight against the capitalist governments and the entire capitalist system. The trade unions around the world, including the UTUJC, are opposed to this political struggle.”

Many workers asked for the copies of the statement and some discussed the difference between the trade unions and the action committees proposed by the SEP.

Following these discussions, one worker commented: “I was wondering how we can proceed. If the government rejects any discussion with the unions, even after two weeks for the strike, what can they do? The trade unions are just instruments dealing with the government and the bosses.”

When SEP members began handing out leaflets at the University of Colombo, UTUJC branch secretary R.P.G.D. Herath threatened the campaigners over a megaphone. He demanded that they stop distributing the leaflet and speaking with workers. However, when the picket protest ended, several strikers held discussions with SEP and IYSSE members.

After reading the SEP statement, Ravindra, a library worker, said: “The government says that it doesn’t have the money to increase our pay but its policies are dictated by the International Monetary Fund and its austerity program. The unions are covering this up from our members... It seems that we are involved in a political fight against a government that carries out the dictates of the international capital.”



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