

Halt the thuggery of non-academic union bureaucrats against WSWs reporters

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka strongly condemns the violence and threats against *World Socialist Web Site* reporters and members of the SEP and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) by officials from the non-academic workers' unions.

Nearly 16,000 non-academic university workers began indefinite strike action on February 28 for a 20 percent wage rise, a medical insurance and pension scheme and other demands. From the outset, the WSWs has provided extensive coverage of the dispute, publicising workers' demands and defending their ongoing industrial action.

On March 27, a WSWs journalist and photographer attending a protest meeting of striking non-academic employees were threatened, manhandled and prevented from reporting the event. The meeting was held at the Ananda Samarakoon open air theatre in Nugegoda in the Colombo suburbs.

Within minutes of the WSWs reporter entering the venue, he was seized by several union officials who dragged him towards the stage. He was surrounded by about 20 union bureaucrats who threatened him.

When the journalist explained that he was from the WSWs and insisted on his right to report on the meeting he was grabbed by the neck by another union official who also threatened him and tried to seize his camera. A second bureaucrat standing on the stage kicked him in the neck. The WSWs reporter was then dragged away by two officials and ejected from the meeting.

Union bureaucrats involved in this anti-democratic and violent assault included K. L. D. J. Richmond, Sisira Perera and H. M. R. P. B. Herath. Ordinary workers attending the meeting did not support the cowardly attack.

Union thugs have previously threatened WSWs reporters. On March 20, the University Trade Unions Joint Committee (UTUJC), a coalition of non-academic unions, organised a march on the Sri Lankan parliament. Police stopped the demonstration, erecting barricades at Battaramulla junction near the parliament.

WSWs reporters covering the protest and distributing a leaflet were confronted by a group of union officials led by H. M. R. P. B. Herath, a key member of the University Trade Union Joint Committee at Moratuwa University.

Herath seized leaflets from Dehin Wasantha, a non-academic worker from Moratuwa University and a leading SEP member. Union officials demanded that IYSSE and SEP members stop distributing leaflets, claiming that the "WSWs was writing lies and criticising us."

Police arrived during Herath's provocation, supported the union officials and ordered SEP members to leave the area. The SEP members defended their democratic rights and continued the campaign.

Claims by non-academic union officials that that the WSWs is "writing lies" is patently false. What they claim to be "lies," in fact, are the truth—legitimate and accurate exposures of the duplicitous role being played by the unions.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has posted nine articles and statements about the strike on the Sinhala-language section of the site, two major articles and other news reports in English, and four articles in Tamil. No other media outlet has reported so extensively on the industrial action.

While a union speaker bewailed the lack of coverage by the bourgeois media at the March 27 Nugegoda strikers' meeting, S. Kalaraj, a non-academic union branch leader in Jaffna acknowledged at a March 22

mass meeting that the SEP was supporting their struggle. An SEP statement on March 24 condemned a court order obtained by the police at the instigation of the Jaffna vice-chancellor banning strikers picketing the university entrance.

The WSWS has systematically explained the political and economic reasons for the government's refusal to grant the strikers' demands or those of other sections of the Sri Lankan working class. President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, who confront an escalating debt and balance of payments crisis, are imposing International Monetary Fund dictated austerity measures against working people and the rural masses.

SEP statements have made clear that non-academic workers and every other section of the working class can only defend their social rights and living conditions through a political struggle against the Colombo administration and in the fight for socialist policies and a workers' and peasants' government.

The trade union bureaucracy is completely hostile to this perspective. From the outset, union officials have sought to constrain workers in harmless protests and pathetic political appeals to the government.

Gayan Peiris, branch leader of the National Workers Union, which is affiliated with the ruling United National Party, told strikers on March 20: "The [government] officials told us we will not be given a cent. But we, the union leaders have been able to bring the honourable minister to a point where he says something should be given to end the strike."

However, rather than grant the key demands of workers, this "something," will be a total fraud which the unions will use to shut down all strike action. This is the experience of every section of the Sri Lankan working class with the unions, which function as an industrial police for the government and business.

SEP statements and articles published by the WSWS have patiently explained the necessity of workers building action committees, democratically controlled by strikers and independent of the trade unions. These committees must organise the fight for non-academic workers' rights, expand the struggle and rally support from other workers, youth and the poor. This is one of the essential lessons of the non-academic workers' industrial action.

The ongoing strike by non-academic university

employees is part of a wave of emerging struggles by education workers and other sections of the working class, not just in Sri Lanka but in the US, Europe and across the world.

The thuggery by union officials against WSWS reporters and SEP supporters is a crude attempt to prevent strikers discussing our analysis and a clear indication that these unions are preparing another betrayal.

The WSWS and the SEP demand the union bureaucracy end its threats and violent attacks. We will not be diverted from telling workers the truth and advancing a political program that meets their needs. We appeal to workers to oppose the unions' anti-democratic actions, study our socialist and internationalist program and join and build the SEP.



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