

Sri Lankan university unions threaten indefinite national strike over wages and benefits

Our correspondents
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Unions covering all university employees announced yesterday that university teachers, non-academic workers and administrative officers will strike indefinitely on September 10 over a series of long-outstanding salary, pension and incentive payment claims.

The Joint Committee of University Trade Unions (JCUTU), which covers non-academic workers, along with the university teachers association and the administrative officers union, issued the threat in response to growing anger by their members. It followed a two-day national strike beginning on August 28 by over 16,000 non-academic workers at 15 state universities.

On the second day of last week's walkout over 2,000 non-academic workers demonstrated outside the University Grant Commission (UGC) in Colombo. Non-academic workers from several state universities participated in the protest chanting slogans and holding placards written in Sinhala and Tamil.

The JCUTU wants university employees' salaries brought into line with other government employees and the payment of all salary increases granted to government workers since 2015. It also wants a proper pension scheme for non-academic workers and increases in incentive payments. Non-academic workers walked out on July 30 over the refusal of university authorities to discuss the JCUTU's demands.

The JCUTC is made up of unions affiliated with the ruling United National Party (UNP), President Maithripala Sirisena's Sri Lanka Freedom Party, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna and so-called independents. It has constantly insisted that limited industrial action and protests will force the government

to implement its demands.

Non-academic workers held a month-and-a-half strike in early 2018 to demand a 20 percent salary increase, insurance and pension schemes and other demands. The strike was betrayed by the union bureaucracy following bogus promises by authorities.

The university workers' fight for improved wages and conditions is part of increasing militancy by private and public sector workers in Sri Lanka and key sections of the international working class. Anger is rising amongst Sri Lankan workers over the government's imposition of International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity attacks on wages, living conditions and social rights.

Tens of thousands of workers from the postal, railway, health and education services, and in the plantations, have come into struggle during the past year in Sri Lanka. University students have also been involved in on-going protests for better facilities and in opposition to the privatisation of tertiary education.

Addressing last Thursday's demonstration in Colombo, Mangala Dabarera, a JCUTU co-president, said nothing about the government attacks and blamed state bureaucrats in the Salary Commission and UGC for blocking workers' demands. "We warn all responsible officers not to underestimate the power of non-academic workers," he declared.

A UNP union bureaucrat added: "If the administrative officers do not solve these problems we will politically intervene in the issue." In other words, trade union officials will growl at government ministers and appeal for a sellout deal whilst blocking any political mobilisation of workers to fight the government.

Contrary to the JTUC's insistence, the state bureaucrats are simply implementing the government's IMF-dictated program. Last month the finance ministry directed all departments to begin slashing their expenditure by 15 percent as announced in the March budget.

The unions are determined to prevent workers challenging the government and its capitalist program. This was clearly demonstrated by the hostility of JTUC bureaucrats towards *World Socialist Web Site* reporters and members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and its youth wing.

Union thugs at Wayamba University in north-western province threatened WSWS reporters and SEP members with physical violence. Likewise at the Colombo protest union officials tried to stop SEP supporters speaking with strikers, claiming they were making false allegations against the joint union committee. At Peradeniya University officials claimed that the WSWS's criticism of their actions would "weaken" the industrial action.

JTUC officials are oppose to the WSWS and the SEP because their analysis makes clear that the attacks on workers' jobs, wages and living conditions are driven by the global crisis of the capitalist system, Colombo's IMF policies and the union's pro-government line. WSWS articles have urged workers to break from the unions and build their own independent rank-and-file controlled action committees to fight for their rights on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.

With global capitalism mired in an unprecedented crisis, governments everywhere are attempting to impose the full burden of the economic downturn on the working class and the oppressed masses, including attacks on wages and living standards and a full-scale assault on state-funded education.

President Sirisena and the Sri Lankan government seized on the April 21 terrorist attacks to declare a state of emergency. Although Sirisena lapsed these measures two weeks ago, he has given the military wide-ranging repressive powers under the Public Security Act and declared public transport an essential service, effectively banning all industrial action.

Last week the government also appointed "competent authorities" to manage several universities. This includes two army major generals who are running a technology institute affiliated to Moratuwa University

and Gampaha Indigenous University, and the appointment of another official to manage Jaffna University.

The views of many striking workers who spoke to the WSWS at the Colombo protest were in stark contrast to the union leadership.

Mahinda, an office clerk from Sri Jayewardenepura University in Colombo said: "I feel that the way our struggle is being conducted is useless. The unions have called off strikes without any success for workers and the same will happen after this strike. We are ready to participate in an indefinite strike but we don't have any organisation that we can to trust."

Manoj, a worker from Moratuwa University, criticised the role played by the unions in previous struggles. "The leaders said that it's easy to win our demands because of the UNP and the SLFP unions [the two main parties in the government]. But the government did not solve our problems and we had to return to work without winning a single demand."

T. Udayarasa from the University of Jaffna, denounced the unions because they represent and defend the government. "The unions have no unity on our issues. They have divided the workers and try to maintain their authority and so the workers always suffer."

Palitha, from the University of Ruhuna, said: "I have participated in many of these sorts of protests over the years. The unions called off strikes saying that authorities had offered some progressive solutions but we soon realised that we won nothing. All the successive governments have continued the austerity measures.

"I've met with the SEP and am clear with its explanation that the problems we face are a result of the crisis of capitalism. Capitalist governments will no longer give anything to workers. It's essential to unite the working class to fight against capitalism."



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