

Build action committees! Expand the strike!

A socialist perspective for the Sri Lankan university employees' struggle

The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka)
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) appeals to all workers in Sri Lanka and internationally to support the indefinite strike launched today by some 17,000 non-academic workers, administrative officers and other employees of state universities. The action is the third stoppage by non-academic workers in just five weeks.

The basic demand of the workers is that they be paid all salary increases and benefits granted to other public sector employees since 2015, including wage incentives and a pension scheme.

Amid growing militancy among the workers, the strike has been called by the Joint Committee of University Trade Unions (JCUTU) and the Central Trade Union Committee.

The unions are seeking to limit the dispute to immediate demands relating to salaries and working conditions. The stoppage, however, is an indication of growing hostility among workers, teachers and students to the assault on public education carried out by successive governments, as part of a broader offensive against the social rights and living conditions of the working class as a whole.

The unions are doing everything they can to prevent these sentiments from developing into a broader confrontation of education workers and students with the government and the entire political establishment.

Even though university teachers have signalled their readiness to join the fight of non-academic staff, their trade unions are seeking a sell-out deal with the government and have refused to participate in the strike.

The unions are seeking to isolate the non-academic workers from other sections of workers and youth, including the tens of thousands of university students who have held a series of protests demanding improved facilities and opposing the privatisation of tertiary education.

More than 200,000 school teachers will also begin a two-day strike on September 26. This is their third protest this year, in a campaign for decent wages, proper facilities and an end to the imposition of burdens on parents.

Despite their political infighting, President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, like their predecessors, both insist that there is “no money” to meet the demands of any section of workers.

The government is granting a host of tax concessions to big business and foreign investors to boost their profits and intensify the exploitation of the working class. At the same time, it is slashing education and health spending and enforcing a rising cost of living.

In 2017 and 2018, government-sector real wages declined by 7.2 percent and 2 percent respectively. Those in the private sector fell by 6 percent and 3.5 percent.

These attacks are being dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which has demanded a reduction of the fiscal deficit to 3.5 percent of gross domestic product in 2020, down from 7 percent in 2015. This is aimed at placing the burden of the deepening capitalist crisis on the backs of the working class, under conditions of massive public debts, the threat of a loan default and rapidly declining economic growth.

These attacks have provoked a wave of struggles over the past months, including by plantation, railway, postal, health, water supply, petroleum, telecom and other workers.

This is part of a global resurgence of working class struggle. In India, 180 million workers engaged in a two-day strike in January, and strikes and protests of teachers, auto and other workers have been on the rise since last month.

In the US, hundreds of thousands of teachers have taken strike action and auto workers voted last week to stop-work as part of the fight against union-company cuts against the destruction of jobs. In France, “Yellow Vest” protests continue against the Macron government, while Hong Kong has been shaken by mass demonstrations that have lasted for months.

These struggles are increasingly emerging in direct opposition to the corporatised unions. They are responding by seeking to subordinate workers to the political

establishment, and by promoting the lie that governments can be pressured to accept workers' demands.

In reality, the policy of the ruling class internationally is to turn to authoritarian and dictatorial forms of rule, in a bid to violently repress the emerging class struggles. The fascistic policies of Trump, in the United States, and the revival of German militarism in Europe, are paralleled in the Indian sub-continent by the Indian government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's police-state lockdown of Kashmir.

The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government similarly seized on the Easter Sunday terrorist bomb attacks in Sri Lanka to equip the security forces with draconian powers. While the state of emergency has officially been lifted, those powers are continued under a public security ordinance, which allows for the banning of industrial action in "essential" industries.

In the lead-up to a presidential election, every party of the capitalist class, including the UNP, the SLFP, the SLPP and the JVP, is signalling its willingness to escalate the drive towards dictatorship and to impose ever-deeper austerity.

This demonstrates that workers, including non-academic staff, require an independent socialist program, in opposition to the entire political establishment and the corporatised unions. The struggles of every section of workers can only go forward as a political fight against the government and its defenders.

Workers must draw the lessons of their own experiences. The unions have demonstrated, time and again, that they will suppress strikes and force through sell-out agreements with the employers and the government.

When the union ended the last two-day strike of non-academic workers on August 29, JCUTU co-president Mangala Dabarera blamed state bureaucrats from the salaries commission and University Grants Commission for not heeding to workers' demands. Dabarera, however, did not say a word of criticism against the government.

A UNP union bureaucrat stated: "If administrative officers do not resolve these issues, we will intervene politically." All this means is that the union officials will seek to direct workers into impotent pleas to government officials, while they work out a betrayal.

On Friday, a union leader told a meeting of non-academic workers at Moratuwa University that the strike would definitely be launched. But in the same breath, he said that it would be called off if a presidential election was called, falsely claiming that this would be required by existing legislation.

His comment is the sharpest warning that the unions are preparing to end the industrial action and do a sordid deal with the government. This demonstrates the urgency of workers taking the struggle into their own hands. The

following steps must be taken:

- Non-academic workers should expand their struggle, by issuing an appeal for joint action to every section of the working class. The SEP calls on university teachers, students and school teachers to rally to the fight of the non-academic staff, in defiance of the unions, and as part of a common struggle to defend education and all social rights.

- Building workers' action committees independent of the unions is a vital political and organisation step forward. It is the only means of breaking out of the straitjacket imposed by the unions, and coordinating a genuine industrial and political campaign. The SEP appeals to non-academic workers to build such committees within universities and in their neighbourhoods.

Last year employees at the Abbotsleigh estate in Hatton established an action committee in response to an SEP appeal. The committee made a powerful intervention, amid a strike by hundreds of thousands of plantation workers for higher wages. Now, a group of artists has responded to a call from the SEP for the formation of an action committee to protect artistic freedom and all democratic rights.

Above all, what is required is a socialist and internationalist perspective. The rights of workers and the poor can only be secured through the reorganisation of society to meet human needs, not the profit interests of a wealthy few. The banks, corporations and factories should be placed under public ownership and democratic workers' control.

This can only be realised through the establishment of a workers' and peasants' government in Sri Lanka as part of the struggle for socialism throughout South Asia and internationally. We urge workers, including university employees, along with students and youth, to join and build the SEP as the necessary revolutionary leadership of this struggle.



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