Sri Lankan university workers indefinite strike at a critical juncture

Our correspondents
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The indefinite strike by Sri Lankan university non-academic workers and executive officers is at a critical stage as it reaches its third week today. While workers have intensified their protest actions, unions are desperately looking for an avenue to shut down the strike.

About 17,000 university employees have been on strike since September 10. They are demanding that they be granted wage increases given to other government workers since 2016, along with a pension scheme and other benefits.

Yesterday, more than 300 workers at the Peradeniya campus marched two kilometres from the university administration building to Gatambe playground near Kandy town where a meeting was held. Some workers blamed the union bureaucracy for not taking steps to mobilise all workers. Peradeniya is the largest university in the country and has employed more than 2,000 non-academic staff.

Last Friday, around 1,000 workers of Jayawardenapura and Moratuwa campuses and Open University held a demonstration at Maharagama, in the suburbs of Colombo. After that they marched three kilometres to reach Jayawardenapura campus and participated in a meeting.

These actions were a part of the campaign by university workers which show their determination to fight. Last Wednesday, more than 5,000 workers from all universities throughout the country came to the capital and protested in front of the University Grant Commission (UGC) office.

Addressing the Peradeniya meeting yesterday, union bureaucrats lamented even after 14 days on strike no responsible government minister had entered discussions, including higher education minister Rauff Hakeem.

Former union president Edward Malwattage, notorious for his past betrayals including a 45-day strike early last year, had been invited to the meeting in a bid to deflect the anger among workers towards the government and unions.

Trying to convince workers that pressure would force the government to make concessions, he made bogus militant noises about “intensifying the struggle,” including organising a march from Peradeniya to Colombo of some 110 kilometres.

Even though the higher education minister had not entered talks, Malwattage boasted that union leaders had met the junior state minister Mohan Lal Grero, who claimed there would be a cabinet paper issued today to increase their salaries.

The *Sunday Times* reported that the finance minister Mangala Samaraweera was seeking for salary increases for public sector workers in a bid to defuse a spate of protests and strikes mainly over salary hikes.

Last week saw the token strikes by tens of thousands of state medical doctors and administrative officers. Early last week tens of thousands of public transport workers went on a strike.

On Friday a section of workers in the railway department, including engine drivers, station masters, technical staff and guards, held a “work to rule” campaign for two days bringing train services to a near breakdown. They have also threatened an indefinite strike.

Yesterday all staff of government administrative offices launched a lightning strike using Facebook. More than 200,000 teachers are to go on two-day sick leave strike on Thursday and Friday.

President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, whatever their political conflicts, are united in implementing austerity demands of the International Monetary Fund. Fearing a major social explosion, the government, aided by the media and unions, is now spreading the illusion that it will alleviate living conditions through salary hikes.

There is no limit to the treachery of the desperate trade

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unions. Yesterday, the president of the Joint Committee of University Trade Unions (JCUTU), Dhammika Priyantha and its secretary, Janaka Wimalasuriya, along with another leader Mangala Dabarera, met with former president Mahinda Rajapakse to appeal for his help.

According to TV reports, Rajapakse said he would consider their demands when he comes to power. In the 2015 presidential elections, people overwhelmingly voted to oust Rajapakse because of his anti-democratic rule and attack on social rights. He is now seeking a come-back by exploiting the opposition to the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government, appealing to the military and rallying Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinist groups.

Rajapakse and his Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) are fielding former defence secretary, Gotabhaya Rajapakse as presidential candidate. The former president's brother is notorious for carrying out the bloody war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and ruthlessly suppressing the struggles of workers and the poor. If he came to power, Gotabhaya Rajapakse would use the same police-state methods to crush the upsurge of the working class.

University workers must oppose these attempts by the trade unions to tie them to the SLPP or any other capitalist party.

A sure sign that the trade unions are preparing to betray the strike is their hostility towards the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaign for the independent mobilisation of workers. At the Maharagama demonstration, union bureaucrats opposed any distribution of a leaflet with the SEP statement "A socialist perspective for the Sri Lankan university employees' struggle."

A trade union leader blared out using a megaphone: "Don't take that leaflet, these are against us. This event was organized by us; you can't distribute leaflets against us." After failing to stop the SEP campaigners, one union official asked the police to remove SEP members, who defended their democratic right to remain and speak to workers.

This attempt to block the SEP demonstrates that the unions will stop at nothing to block the independent mobilisation of workers on the basis of a revolutionary, socialist program. The unions function as industrial police for the government and companies against the working class.

The hostility of workers to the unions was expressed in their comments to the WSWS.

Ruwan Pathirana, a worker from Sri Palee campus of Colombo University, said workers had been forced to do overtime because their basic salary was not enough. Speaking about last year's 45-day strike, Pathirana said: "We didn't get anything from that struggle because of the union leaders' betrayal. Both my wife and I joined the strike. We need the support of students and other workers. A student movement would have big power."

Herath, a worker at Peradeniya university, said: "The trade unions didn't explain the root of these attacks [on our rights] as was explained by your party." He said his salary "is nearly 50,000 rupees, but out of that 20,000 is spent on debts. Like many workers, I have to do overtime and depend on it."

Herath explained the difficult working conditions: "Workers come to work before 7.15 am, and after 4 pm they do overtime for about five hours. When a worker is late by one minute in the morning 15 minutes taken from overtime work." He declared that the "trade unions didn't take any action on these problems, they don't speak about these things."

Madhushanka, a fourth year art student at Jayawardenepura University, told SEP campaigners that "students must actively support the workers' struggle. I asked at the student union of Jayawardenepura why we are not supporting this struggle. Students must have working class leadership to win their demands."

The SEP calls on non-academic workers to draw the necessary conclusions from the treachery of the unions and launch their own independent struggle. We urge workers to build their own action committees independent of the unions. Non-academic workers should build such committees in the universities and their neighbourhoods, and to turn to other sections of the working class for support.

Such a political struggle must be based on an anti-capitalist program. The only alternative for the working class is fight for a workers' and peasants' government in Sri Lanka as part of the struggle for socialism throughout South Asia and internationally.

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