

How to win the teachers' fight in Sri Lanka

The Socialist Equality Party teachers group
25 September 2019

More than 200,000 government school teachers will strike in Sri Lanka this Thursday and Friday, with thousands demonstrating in Colombo tomorrow.

The teachers' entirely legitimate demands include the removal of salary anomalies with a pay rise, no burdening of teachers with additional work, 6 percent of GDP allocated to education, an end to the collection of money from parents, restoration of the pre-2016 pension system, and no appointment of government cronies to top education posts.

This week's national walkout is the third teachers' strike this year, with large numbers of teachers participating in the March 13 and July 26–27 strikes, despite the unions' attempts to limit all industrial action. The teachers' militancy is an indication of their seething anger over the dire living and working conditions they face.

Teachers confront a skyrocketing cost of living expenses and are struggling to maintain a bare-minimum living standard on the pittance they currently receive. A teacher's basic starting salary is 28,000 rupees (\$US138) and, even with additional allowances, is no more than 35,000 rupees per month. The gross salary of a 20-year-experienced Grade I teacher is just 60,000 rupees.

The real value of these meagre salaries has been eroded over the years. In 2017 and 2018, for example, real wages in the public sector, including for teachers, declined by 7.2 percent and 2 percent respectively.

Teachers are forced to endure overcrowded classrooms and are loaded down with hours of clerical work, including preparing performance reports. Moreover, they often have to travel long distances.

The Teacher-Principal Trade Union Alliance (TUA) has been forced to call the strike under intense pressure from rank-and-file members, who are angered over the ongoing refusal of the government of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil

Wickremesinghe to grant their demands.

Like their Sri Lankan counterparts, tens of thousands of teachers in the US, Mexico, Germany, France, Portugal, the Netherlands, Brazil, Morocco, Zimbabwe, South Africa, India and Pakistan have taken strike action over the past year, in protest against wage cuts, privatisations and sackings. This is part of a wave of industrial action by the international working class, and an indication that workers everywhere are determined to fight government and ruling class attacks on their social and democratic rights.

As Sri Lankan teachers take action tomorrow, the indefinite strike by 17,000 non-academic university workers, demanding higher pay, enters its third week. University students have repeatedly come into struggle to oppose privatisation and to demand proper facilities, as demonstrations by students and parents insisting upon more teachers and better schools become more frequent across the country.

Over the past two weeks, government medical doctors, railway workers, administrative officers, along with workers at divisional secretariats and employees in public transport, have also taken strike action or held protests.

Facing an escalating economic downturn and a severe debt crisis, the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government's International Monetary Fund-dictated policies are directed against all working people. And these attacks will continue, whoever wins the scheduled November presidential elections.

Every faction of Sri Lanka's political elite is committed to reducing the country's budget deficit to 3.5 percent of GDP by 2020—i.e., to half of the 7 percent GDP level recorded in 2015. Key targets in this assault are education and health, with the government planning to intensify the privatisation of these sectors.

The TUA consists of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna-affiliated Ceylon Teacher Service Union (CTSU), the

Ceylon Teachers Union (CTU) and several other unions.

CTSU general secretary Mahinda Jayasinghe told a media briefing on September 15 that although the government had promised to address teachers' demands, following the March 13 walkout, nothing had happened in the five-month period since then. Jayasinghe's lament has been repeated by the teachers' unions for decades.

While the teacher unions said last week that a salary anomaly created in 1997 had still not been resolved, the union bureaucracies have insisted, for the past 22 years, that teachers could win their demands by pressuring the government.

Such is the futility and bankruptcy of the teacher unions. Theirs is a perspective echoed by every other union, and one that has paved the way for ever more attacks. The TUA, however, still cynically declares, "Let us show the power that teachers and principals have."

Teachers should decisively reject this agenda.

The policy of the current government, and any future administration, is to impose the IMF's austerity demands, while whipping up anti-Tamil and anti-Muslim chauvinism to divide the working class, boosting repressive military and police powers and nurturing right-wing fascistic outfits. Every faction of the ruling elite is calculating how it can establish police-state methods to crush the workers, students and other oppressed masses entering into struggle.

In advance of the April 21 terrorist bombing in Sri Lanka, the political elites were warned, but turned a blind eye until it actually took place. They then seized on the atrocity to unleash draconian emergency laws and deploy the military. The teacher unions responded by backing these repressive measures and postponing a scheduled May 9–10, two-day strike. While President Sirisena has suspended the emergency laws, he has issued extraordinary gazette notifications to maintain the deployment and extend unprecedented powers to the military.

The teacher unions are directly connected to Sri Lanka's bourgeois political parties and function to keep workers tied to the existing order. They all backed Sirisena's elevation into the presidency in 2015.

* Teachers, like all other workers coming into struggle, cannot rely on the trade unions. In order to

fight for decent wages, better schools and working conditions, and for the defence of their democratic rights, they must mobilise their independent class strength and unify their actions with every other section of the working class.

* We call on teachers to build action committees at their schools, independent of the unions, and to actively engage parents and students in this fight. Such committees are a necessary step towards the unification of teachers with all other workers fighting Colombo's austerity measures, and towards forging alliances with teachers and workers internationally.

In order to defeat the mounting attacks on education, health and other basic social requirements, the working class needs its own socialist and internationalist strategy. The root cause of the attacks on the rights of teachers and the working class as a whole is the profit system.

The enormous wealth produced by the working class must be used to improve the physical and cultural level of the masses, ensure free quality education for all and liberate mankind from poverty, exploitation and war. To do so, the working class must take political power into its own hands and reorganise the economy on the basis of social need, not private profit.

This means the fight for a workers and peasants government, as part of a union of socialist republics in the Indian subcontinent. We call on teachers and all workers, students and youth to join us in this struggle.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact