

Sri Lankan education safety committee holds well-attended online meeting

Our correspondents
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The Safety Committee of Teachers, Students and Parents (SCTSP) in Sri Lanka held its first online meeting on January 7 to discuss “How to fight the reopening of schools amidst unsafe conditions.”

Over 50 people, including teachers, education professionals, non-academic workers, Health Workers Action Committee (HWAC) members, university students, parents and supporters, participated in the meeting. An educators’ newsletter, issued by the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) and the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), helped promote the event.

The meeting was called following an announcement by President Gotabhaya Rajapakse’s government that all Sri Lankan schools, apart from those in the Western Province, would reopen on January 11, even though COVID-19 continues to spread across the country.

Kapila Fernando, a member of the SCTSP and the SEP Political Committee, chaired the meeting. He pointed out that the unsafe opening of schools around the world was one of the main reasons for the rapid spread of the coronavirus.

Last year, the Rajapakse government kept all schools open, apart from those in the Western Province, despite teachers and students identifying continuous positive cases. “The government ignored the strong opposition from teachers, students and parents to school being open,” he said.

Fernando explained that it was necessary to take forward this widespread opposition through the formation of safety committees of teachers, students and parents and the fight for socialist policies.

Action committee and SEP Political Committee member Prageeth Aravinda delivered the meeting’s main report. He pointed out that the pandemic was a trigger event that had accelerated the crisis of global

capitalism, including in Sri Lanka.

Aravinda said that the decisions taken in response to COVID-19 by governments everywhere were not aimed at protecting the lives of the ordinary people, but to defend the profit interests of big business.

Governments all around the world, he said, were sending employees back to work in unsafe conditions. They wanted schools kept open, so children were not at home and workers could be pushed back into factories and other workplaces. The government’s criminal policy, he explained, “is an attempt to pretend that the situation is normal, in order to keep the capitalist economy open.”

Aravinda stressed that workers must reject the false claims made by the government and the media that children are less affected by the pandemic. He urged all those in attendance to closely study and circulate the analysis of the pandemic presented by the WSWS.

The government’s inadequate spending on health care in schools, the speaker declared, multiplied the danger of an even more severe spread of COVID-19. Its 2020 budget had further slashed allocations in the education sector by 39 billion rupees, leaving responsibility for proper sanitation in the schools to local communities.

“Neither teachers, students nor parents should have to bear the risk of the government sacrificing their lives in the interests of the profit greed of big business. Their demand should be the unconditional use of the wealth accumulated by the capitalists to save lives threatened by the pandemic,” he stressed.

Aravinda said that the education trade unions fully endorsed the government’s shameful policies. “Just as the industrial sector unions have joined hands with the employers and the government to slash workers’ wages

and jobs, the education sector unions are calling on the government to involve them in the decision-making to keep schools open.”

The speaker said that the Socialist Equality Parties around the world, affiliated to the International Committee of the Fourth International, had taken the lead in building rank-and-file committees to fight the unsafe COVID-19 responses of governments and the unions. He presented the meeting with a PowerPoint overview of the work being conducted by the SEP-led educators’ rank-and-file committees in the US, Europe and Australia.

Aravinda urged participants to form rank-and-file committees in schools, universities and other educational institutions, to unite all workers in a common struggle for their democratic rights. The SCTSP was established to unify educators’ struggles with other sections of the working class in Sri Lanka and internationally.

During the discussion, a doctor from a hospital in Kandy, and a member of the Health Workers Action Committee, addressed the meeting. Pointing to the growing wave of action by Sri Lankan healthcare workers, he said: “These struggles will be a great stimulus to workers in the field of education to advance their fight. This action committee of educators will play a crucial role in directing such struggles towards a socialist program.”

Ashoka, a teacher from a school in Nikaweratiya, about 120 km from Colombo, told the meeting that experiences at his school showed the necessity for action committees. His school became unsafe in November, after a student was identified as a close contact of a COVID-19 patient. While other students did not attend the school, the government failed to take the necessary healthcare measures.

Ashoka said that teachers at the school discussed the situation, were concerned about coming to work, and decided to take sick leave. “We needed a program, though, to take our fight forward. We had to decide independently what we would do, because the union did not intervene at all,” he said.

An SCTPS member spoke with the teachers and an initial report was published on the *World Socialist Web Site*. The SEP action committee’s intervention, Ashoka

said, laid the foundations to form a safety committee at the school.

Lakmal, an advanced level teacher at a school in Homagama, a Colombo suburb, contributed to the discussion. He said that government claims that schools were being opened in order to advance students’ education was false.

“The government is using the capitalist media to propagate this lie. They don’t care about the welfare of students. They want to forcibly impose on people a ‘new normal’ in the midst of the pandemic and keeping schools open is part of that,” he said. “We must oppose putting the lives of our students in danger.”

Adding to the discussion, Sampath, an education professional, said, “There is opposition among teachers to what could become a powerful force, under proper guidance, to the fight against the reopening of schools.” There were many political and professional issues confronting teachers, he said, and expressed the hope that the building of action committees throughout the education sector would strengthen their struggle.

Nilwala, a retired teacher, congratulated the action committee for organising the online discussion and asked how Sri Lankan educators could be convinced that they needed action committees.

Answering her question, Aravinda said the crucial task was to make the analysis of the WSWS and its educators’ newsletters the most widely read publications among education workers. The action committee should be in the forefront of providing political guidance in the formation of such committees and be sensitive to the issues facing educators, he added.

Aravinda concluded the discussion by inviting all the participants to join the SEP and its action committees and become part of the fight for socialism.



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