

A program of struggle for the teachers' wage strike in Sri Lanka

Teacher-Student-Parent Safety Committee
26 July 2021

The Sri Lankan public school teachers' "online learning" strike has now entered its third week. Teachers are demanding a salary increase, abolition of existing "salary anomalies" and withdrawal of the Kotelawala National Defence University Act (KNDUA).

Over 200,000 teachers across the country are involved in the strike, called by the Ceylon Teachers Union (CTU), Ceylon Teacher Service Union, United Teachers Union and several other unions.

The teacher unions were forced to call the "online learning" strike after police brutally suppressed a protest against the KNDUA on July 8. Several participants, including CTU General Secretary Joseph Stalin, were arrested and detained at an Air Force-controlled quarantine centre.

The KNDUA has been presented to parliament by the defence ministry and will be debated in early August. If passed, it will give the military-controlled tertiary institution, which was originally established to train senior officers, the same powers as other universities, under the University Grants Commission, including to establish more private fee-paying courses. The transformation of the university is part of the government's moves towards the privatisation of education and the militarisation of society. Teacher union officials and others were released in the face of widespread anger over the police crackdown. The unions have been compelled to continue the national strike, because teachers are determined to win their long-standing demands.

The Teacher-Student-Parent Safety Committee (TSPSC) and Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warn that the teachers' national strike is at a critical turning point. Despite the government's intransigence and threats, the unions continue to insist that pressure will force it to bow to teachers' demands. They are deliberately limiting industrial action, in preparation for shutting down the struggle.

On July 22, over 2,000 teachers marched to the presidential secretariat in central Colombo. Teacher union leaders were summoned to a meeting with senior officials, with Education Minister G.L. Peiris participating via

telephone.

Following the talks, CTU General Secretary Stalin told teachers that discussions would be held on Tuesday with the minister and officials, regarding a "cabinet paper" on their demands. This would be followed by a discussion with President Gotabhaya Rajapakse on July 30.

A similar "cabinet paper" was prepared by the minister when teachers held a one-day sick leave strike in January 2020. The union bureaucracy hailed this as a victory, but later admitted there would be no change in teachers' wages or conditions.

The unions have called for the "elimination of salary anomalies," comparing teachers' wages with the salaries of other state employees. But instead of uniting all workers in a common fight for decent living wages, the unions are dividing the workers. Likewise, the different unions among teachers are dividing the latter and stoking grievances over grade differences.

The unions are also demanding that teachers' service be classified as a separate "closed service," meaning that employees can only be transferred within the education sector, not to other public sectors. The unions make the empty claim that this would improve wages and conditions. "Closed services" in other state sectors, such as the railways and the postal services, have produced no improvements for workers.

The teacher unions' leadership now boasts that the unions have never been more "united," that they are better able to pressure the government and win their demands. Since 1997, teachers have heard this rhetoric constantly, at protests over the past 24 years, when the unions first called for abolition of "salary anomalies."

Teachers must reject union claims that increased pressure will shift the government. In fact, the Rajapakse government, which confronts a profound economic crisis, exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, is preparing to unleash even greater attacks on the working class.

On July 24, Trade Minister Bandula Gunawardena told the media that the government spends 86 percent of its revenue

on state employees' salaries and a teachers' wage rise was "impossible, given the depth of the economic crisis induced by the pandemic."

If the government granted teachers' salary demands, it would have to increase taxes and burden the people, he declared, in an attempt to pit other workers and the poor against teachers.

The Rajapakse government, however, has already increased taxes on the masses, while granting huge tax concessions and cheap capital to big business.

Last week, Basil Rajapakse, the newly-appointed finance minister, directed officials to prune state-sector expenditure and not hire new workers. Colombo has slashed imports and forced employees to work in dangerous pandemic conditions, in a desperate attempt to earn foreign exchange to pay huge external debts.

The education budget has also been slashed this year to 126 billion rupees (\$US630 million), down from 166 billion rupees in 2019. Only about 1.2 percent of gross domestic product is being allocated to education spending.

In recent months, thousands of health, postal and plantation workers have taken industrial action against government and big business attacks on living and social conditions. Other sections of the population, including poor peasants and fishermen, have protested, demanding financial support from the government.

These struggles are part of a wave of working class resistance unfolding around the world. Like its international counterparts, the Rajapakse administration has responded to the rising social opposition with anti-democratic measures and moves towards a presidential dictatorship.

The trade unions have responded to the rising opposition by doing their utmost to prevent workers coming into struggle. When forced to call industrial action, they treacherously work to contain and then scuttle it, betraying their members' demands.

The unions fully backed Rajapakse's demand for a reopening of the economy, amid the ongoing pandemic, thus placing workers and their families in harm's way. The teachers' unions, likewise, have supported the reopening of schools in unsafe conditions.

On May 27 and June 2, President Rajapakse imposed the essential public services act, which bans any strike action and protests by workers in 12 public sector entities. While the government continues to renew this repressive measure every two weeks, it has not been opposed by a single union, including the teachers' unions.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, Samagi Jana Balavegaya, the Tamil National Alliance and pseudo-left groups, such as the Frontline Socialist Party, have supported this anti-democratic attack. The Socialist Equality Party is

the only organisation to oppose it and call on workers to prepare for struggle to defeat it.

The struggle against Colombo's attacks, and the defence of living and social rights, require a political struggle against the government and the entire capitalist system. The unions are utterly hostile to such a fight.

Teachers cannot allow their strike to remain under the control of the unions. They must take their struggle into their own hands.

We urge teachers to build independent Teacher-Student-Parent Safety Committees at every school, to rally parents, students and other sections of the working class, as well as the oppressed, to defend public free education with the following demands:

- Increase teachers' minimum monthly wage to 60,000 rupees, indexed to the cost of living!
- Full pensions for all teachers!
- Allocate 10 percent of GDP to public education!
- All teachers and students to be provided with free computers and online facilities!
- No reopening of schools under unsafe pandemic conditions!
- The provision of adequate housing-loan facilities with low interest rates!
- These vitally necessary demands cannot be met under the capitalist profit system. The billions of rupees required can only be found by refusing to pay foreign loans and nationalising the big companies, large estates and the banks under workers' democratic control. A workers' and peasants' government must be brought to power to implement these policies. This struggle can be waged only as part of the struggle for international socialism.

This is the program advanced by the SEP in Sri Lanka, as part of the International Committee of the Fourth International's fight to develop the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

The TSPSC will hold an online public meeting on the program for teachers' struggle on Friday, July 30 at 7 p.m. We urge teachers, students and workers to participate in this meeting and discussion. Please register for the meeting here.



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