

Sri Lankan government rejects teachers' wage demand

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Sri Lankan Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse told a meeting with teacher union officials on Tuesday that the government was not in a financial position to address their wage demands. Over 200,000 public school teachers have been holding a national “online learning” strike since July 12 to win higher salaries.

Teachers are also demanding withdrawal of the Kotelawala National Defence University Act (KNDUA), which will be debated in parliament next month. If the Act is passed, the military-controlled university will be able to establish more private fee-paying courses. The Act is part of the government's moves towards the privatisation of education and the militarisation of society.

The teachers' wage demands were rejected on Monday at the weekly meeting of cabinet of ministers, which is chaired by President Gotabhaya Rajapakse, citing Sri Lanka's economic crisis. The economy has been heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse was appointed to head a sub-committee and directed to meet with teacher union officials on Tuesday. Those attending included leaders of the Ceylon Teachers Union (CTU), the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna-controlled Ceylon Teachers Service Union (CTSUS), the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party affiliated United Teachers Service Union, and officials from other educators' unions.

According to media reports, Mahinda Rajapakse claimed that the government knew that the wage issue “needs to be resolved.” However, he then said that “under the present global situation and the country's financial predicament, the government was not in a position to rectify the salary issue at this moment.”

The prime minister cynically “assured” the assembled union bureaucrats that the matter would be discussed with the salaries commission and a decision taken soon.

An official statement from the Prime Minister's Office indicates that the teachers' union leadership fully

endorsed the government's position. They urged the prime minister to take “a policy decision” to reduce salary anomalies, adding that they had “a clear understanding that an immediate increment for the salaries is not possible due to the current economic crisis in the country.”

In other words, the unions have betrayed the teachers' salary demands once again, and are now working to shut down all industrial action on the basis of another empty promise from the government to “reduce the salary anomalies” at some unspecified future date.

The teachers' unions first called for wage increases 24 years ago, in 1997, and have systematically betrayed every struggle by teachers since then on the basis of bogus government promises.

Addressing a media conference on Tuesday, teacher union officials, who are nervous about the rising anger of their members, did not reveal that they had accepted the government's dictates.

Attempting to put on a brave face, CTSU secretary Mahinda Jayasinghe simply told the media that talks with government had failed. Fearing that any attempt to immediately shut down the strike could see the unions lose control, Jayasinghe said the strike would continue.

Social unrest and working-class anger are rising across the country in response to the efforts of the Rajapakse government and big business to offload the burden of the economic crisis on to the working masses.

Yesterday, university teachers held a one-day strike against the KNDUA. On the same day, hundreds of nurses from several hospitals participated in a lunch-hour protest called by the Government Nursing Officers Union over worsening conditions in the health system.

Last month, the nurses' unions betrayed national strike action by 25,000 nurses over 14 demands, including professional and risk allowances, staff grade positions with a legitimate promotion system and the easing of

unbearable workloads, after agreeing to similar empty promises from the government.

Starting on July 26, teachers stepped up their industrial action, by withdrawing from practical examination-related duties for GCE Ordinary Levels, Sri Lanka's major exams for Grade 11 students. They have also placed bans on preparing student applications for Advanced Level Examinations.

The mainstream media has unleashed a vicious campaign against the striking teachers. An editorial in the *Island* newspaper yesterday stated that "government teachers deserve a better deal" but added, "the question is whether this is the right time for salary increases in the public sector. The economy is also on oxygen support."

Parroting the government's line, the editorial declared the "pay hike would mean tax increases and the aggravation of the woes of the public struggling to keep the wolf from the door." It then praised the Rajapakse administration, stating that "it is heartening that the government has paid off a one-billion-dollar bond debt" before deadline and is helping to "boost investor confidence."

Government, big business and their media are united in their efforts to ensure that profits come before human lives. The struggles of teachers, health workers and other public sector workers further reveal that the unions are aiding and abetting the ruling elite's efforts to impose the burden of the worsening economic crisis on the working class and the poor.

The Socialist Equality Party urges teachers to reject the sell-out being organised by the unions on behalf of the government and take up the program of struggle for the independent mobilisation of the working class as outlined in the Teacher-Student-Parent Safety Committee (TSPSC) statement on July 26.

We urge teachers, students and workers to attend tomorrow's online meeting on July 30 at 7 p.m. and take forward a discussion of these policies and the vital issues facing the working class. Please register for the meeting [here](#).

Several teachers from across island who plan to attend tomorrow night's TSPSC online meeting commented to the WSWS.

Sadeera, a physics teacher from Colombo, said: "While it is important that the school teachers are protesting against the privatisation of education, the trade unions and student unions are not doing anything to unite this struggle.

"The number of people participating this time in the

teachers' action looks higher than ever but it is the same old program. The government is already opposed to a pay rise for teachers so when the government says 'no' to our demands, teachers must unite with other workers and challenge the government."

Dharmarathna, an Advanced Level teacher at a school in Homagama, a Colombo suburb, said: "Even though it is a highly responsible job, teachers' salaries are very low. This is the result of the slashing of free education by every government.

"Although the government has banned protests, alleging them to be a violation of quarantine laws, it has allowed companies to bring workers to factories and sacrifice their lives for the pandemic and boost profits. So far teachers have listened to what the union leaders say but I believe we need to have a completely different program to take forward this struggle."

Pamuditha, a teacher from Matugama in the Western Province, said: "The recent struggles of teachers, health workers and peasants reveal a huge social crisis in the country. The pressure on teachers has been doubled down because they have to be involved in online education but without any government support."

Mahesh, a teacher from Polonnaruwa, the second-largest city in the North Central Province, said: "Teachers have been forced to fight in response to falling incomes, the stoppage of tuition classes and skyrocketing living costs. We should not allow the trade unions to derail the teachers' opposition this time. A wide fighting front should be built by teachers, students and parents against the trade unions' betrayal by joining the Teacher-Student-Parent Safety Committee."



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