Teacher-Student-Parent Safety Committee in Sri Lanka holds successful online meeting

Our reporters
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The Teacher-Student-Parent Safety Committee (TSPSC) in Sri Lanka held an important online meeting on July 30. Entitled "How to win the teachers' wage struggle," the meeting was attended by about 100 people with several dozen watching via Facebook.

Teachers from across Sri Lanka, including Colombo, Kalutara, Kandy, Chilaw, Dankotuwa, Nawalapitiya, Polonnaruwa, Bandarawela, Kurunegala and Kuliyapitiya, participated, along with students from several other areas. So far more than 500 have watched the event.

Around 250,000 Sri Lanka teachers and principals are involved in an ongoing "online learning" strike to win higher pay and other demands. The industrial action has now entered its fourth week.

On July 26, a meeting of cabinet ministers overseen by Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse rejected the teachers' pay demands. The following day Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse told the teacher unions' leaders that the wage claims could not be granted because of the country's "difficult economic situation."

The TSPSC issued a statement at the very beginning of the strike, insisting that teachers needed to take control of their strike and go forward on the basis of an independent political perspective and an international socialist program.

TSPSC member Kapila Fernando, who is also a member of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) Political Committee, chaired the online meeting. He reviewed the teachers' determined action, pointing out that it had developed in response to increased living costs, unsafe working conditions created by the COVID-19 pandemic and the government's refusal to provide the necessary facilities for online education.

"The starting monthly salary of a teacher is currently 32,500 rupees ($US163), while the salary of a senior teacher with over 20 years' service is only 65,000 rupees," Fernando said.

"While the net salary for a teacher, after deductions of loan instalments, is insufficient to provide the daily food and clothing needs of a family, teachers have to spend their own money to conduct online lessons," he added.

Fernando explained that the Rajapakse government had reintroduced the Kotelawala National Defence University Act (KNDUA). The legislation, he said, would enable the military, which is controlling the facility, to establish fee-levying campuses as part of the government's privatisation of education and militarisation of the country. The Rajapakse regime has rejected the opposition of teachers and students to this bill, as well as teachers' salary demands.

The speaker insisted that teachers needed to break with the unions' bankrupt perspective of pressuring the government and called on teachers to take forward the struggle by building their own action committees in schools and neighbourhoods.

Fernando pointed to initiative of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) for an International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees and referred to the recent support from the Educators Rank-and-File Committee in New York for the striking Sri Lankan teachers and the TSPSC's July 28 statement.

Prageeth Aravinda presented the main report to the meeting, explaining how the unions have consistently betrayed teachers' wage struggles over the past 24 years. The teachers' unions, he said, had called the current industrial action only because they feared teachers' opposition could escalate out of their control.

"According to the union leaders, the teachers' struggle has now gone too far and they are seeking a way to betray this struggle. They have appealed to the government to accept a wage increase for teachers as a 'policy' decision, whilst agreeing that the government is in economic difficulties and cannot give a wage rise at this time," Aravinda said.

The speaker reviewed how the current union leaderships behaved when teachers went on strike during the communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

"In 2007, the then President Mahinda Rajapakse confronted teachers' union officials, including Ceylon

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Teachers Union leader Joseph Stalin, by asking: 'We do not have money to allocate for this [wage increase]. Do you say that we should withdraw the military from the North and East?' Stalin and other union leaders retreated and called off the strike in order to support the war.

"Mahinda Jayasinghe, leader of the Ceylon Teacher Service Union (CTSU), which is controlled by Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, says 'governments have cheated us for 24 years.' However, the same union leaders have presented successive governments' false promises as victories!" Aravinda said.

The speaker said that the Rajapakse government, which is carrying out brutal austerity measures amid the crisis exacerbated by the global pandemic, was gutting social spending, including education and health, imposing tax burdens on the masses and privatising public enterprises. Aravinda pointed out that the government had reduced spending on education and health in this year's budget by 40 billion and 28 billion rupees respectively.

The Rajapakse government, he continued, is moving towards a presidential dictatorship based on the military and on May 27 used essential public service orders to ban strikes and protests. "The unions have silently supported all these measures, including the government's essential services decree," he said.

Aravinda told the meeting that the unions function as sellers of labour power within the capitalist system and defend the major corporations and governments in every country. He referred to "Why are the trade unions hostile to socialism?" by WSWS international editorial board chairman David North and went on to explain how the health workers unions had betrayed their members, forcing them back to work in unsafe conditions amid the pandemic.

The speaker reviewed the TSPSC's call for teachers' minimum basic salary to be increased to 60,000 rupees, indexed to the cost of living, the provision of pensions, and for teachers and students to be given computers and internet data access.

"None of these demands," Aravinda said, "can be met under the capitalist system. Only a workers' and peasants' government, implementing socialist policies, can grant them. We urge teachers and other workers to join the SEP, our action committees and read the WSWS."

During the question session, a teacher from Chilaw in the Northwestern Province asked for more clarification of the SEP's program to win the wages and defeat government repression. He suggested that the trade unions expected to "market" teachers' wage demands by basing them on opposition to the KNDUA.

SEP General Secretary Wije Dias responded from the audience:

"The approach of the listener from Chilaw who commented on the struggle of the teachers, suffers from a fundamental fault. He says that the struggle was started by the union leaders, who thought that their arrest during the protest demonstration of teachers and university students against the KNDUA, was an opportune moment to 'market' their demand for the eradication of teachers' salary anomalies."

The subjective intentions of the union bureaucracies, Dias continued, cannot be used to assess the broad and militant struggle of the teachers who are angered by unbearable cost of living increases and 24 years of delays in correcting salary discrepancies, despite continuous demands and protests by teachers.

"As our listener acknowledges, he is deprived of about 35,000 rupees a month due to the salary anomalies. So these are the objective factors that drove the teachers into struggle, despite the hesitations and opposition of the union bureaucracy. This is part of the widespread struggles of the workers throughout the region of South Asia and internationally, at present.

"The capitalist system," Dias continued, "is embroiled in an unprecedented economic and political crisis around the world, on which the speakers have spoken at length. This has created a situation where an unbridgeable gulf has been created between what the bourgeois ruling elites are preparing for the people and the aspirations of the working class and the oppressed masses. The answer of the ruling classes everywhere to the demands of the working people and youth is to prepare social counter-revolution and war.

"The working class, under these conditions must end its existence as an exploited class for the capitalist system and become a class for itself. This means overturning capitalist rule and the establishment of working-class power with the support of the rural poor and youth, to implement a socialist program.

"The existing left parties and trade union leaderships are not only totally inadequate for this but completely hostile to such a struggle. This is because they are tied, from head to foot, to the coat tails of the ruling classes. This is why the Socialist Equality Party is fighting to build a mass revolutionary party of international socialism to lead the working class in the socialist economic, political and cultural transformation of society to fulfil the needs of working people," Dias said in conclusion.

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