

# Forty-four arrested after protest by striking Sri Lankan teachers in Colombo

**Our reporters**  
**6 August 2021**

In a blatant anti-democratic attack, Sri Lankan police arrested 40 teachers, including 16 female educators, and four drivers of the vehicles they were travelling in, following a protest for higher wages outside the presidential secretariat in Colombo on Wednesday.

Around 2,000 teachers participated in the demonstration which assembled outside the secretariat after travelling by motorcade from the suburbs of Welisara, Kadawatha, Moratuwa and Pannipitiya. The protest was held in defiance of a court order obtained by the police to ban the event.

The teachers were arrested by Colombo Harbour police who jailed them until the following day when they were brought before a magistrate. Hundreds of teachers mobilised near the court premises in support of their arrested colleagues. They were blocked by baton-wielding riot police.

In court police opposed any release, spuriously arguing that those arrested broke quarantine regulations, participated in an unlawful assembly and violated thoroughfare laws.

The magistrate ruled, however, that the police had failed to justify why they should not be released. The decision was in response to widespread establishment fears that the ongoing incarceration of the educators would provoke mass outrage. Those arrested were released on 100,000 rupees (\$US500) personal bail. It is not yet clear whether the police plan to initiate charges.

The Rajapakse government is intensifying repression against anyone protesting its socially-regressive policies.

This week police unleashed a witch-hunt against the organisers of a demonstration near parliament on Tuesday of students and teachers opposing the Kotelawala National Defence University Act (KNDUA). The law is a part of accelerating moves by the government to privatise education and expand the militarisation of government rule.

The “Student and People’s Movement for Schools” protest, which also involved university teachers, was initiated by the Inter University Student Federation (IUSF), controlled by the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP). Police used force and iron barricades to block the demonstration.

On Wednesday night, police arrested FSP leader Chameera Koswatta and party member Kaushalya Hansamli who participated in the protest and the following day detained five student leaders, including IUSF convenor Wasantha Mudalige.

Nearly 250,000 public school teachers and principals are continuing their “online learning” strike which began on July 12.

The Ceylon Teachers Union (CTU), the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna-controlled Ceylon Teachers Service Union (CTSU), the FSP-affiliated United Teachers Service Union and several other unions called Wednesday’s protest in response to the rising anger of teachers over repeated government rejections of their wage demands. Educators are also calling for the withdrawal of the KNDUA.

The teachers’ strike is in defiance of education ministry orders that all principals and teachers should report for work on Monday. This directive is in line with last week’s government circular declaring that all state sector employees working from home must return to their workplaces.

Teachers’ union leaders met with an official from the president’s office on Wednesday during the protest. He told the union leaders that a committee of officials from the state treasury and the national salaries commission has been appointed to look into teachers’ wage demand. The new committee is yet another government manoeuvre.

Addressing Wednesday’s protest, leaders of the teachers’ unions made demagogic speeches in an attempt to keep their members under control. CTU leader Joseph

Stalin thundered: “We came to inform you [the government] that if our problem is not solved by next Monday our actions will be stronger.” He called on the cabinet of ministers’ meeting on Monday to provide “a solution.”

CTSU secretary Mahinda Jayasinghe was more vociferous: “If you do not solve the problem we will not only close the gates of the presidential office but will file around the whole secretariat building with hundreds of thousands of heads... the struggle will end victoriously.”

In reality, the union leaders are rapidly moving to end the teachers strike action and impose another betrayal.

On July 28, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse met with teacher union leaders, bluntly declaring that “under the present global situation and the country’s financial predicament, the government is not in a position to rectify the salary issue at this moment.” The union leaders assured the prime minister that they understood the economic crisis facing the country and were not expecting an increase in teachers’ pay. They urged him to simply make a “policy” decision to reduce salary anomalies.

On August 2, President Rajapakse for a second time told his cabinet of ministers that the teachers’ wage demand could not be granted.

According to media reports, he said nothing about a “policy decision” to reduce salary anomalies, as hoped for by the unions as an excuse to end all industrial action. Instead, the president cynically “admitted” that teachers’ wages had to be increased but said that the salary problems of all state employees would be considered in the government’s November budget.

Kapila Fernando, a teacher and a leading member of the Teachers-Students-Parents Safety Committee (TSPSC), attempted to address Wednesday’s protest, following speeches by union leaders. Fernando is also a Socialist Equality Party (SEP) Political Committee member with a long record of struggle among teachers and other sections of the working class. CTU leader Joseph Stalin intervened and prevented him from speaking.

Fernando insisted on his democratic rights as a teacher involved in the struggle, but Stalin stopped him, declaring, “This is a meeting of our unions. You can speak in a meeting organised by you. We have taken this protest to a certain stage, don’t spoil it.”

Speaking with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters after the event, Fernando said Stalin and the other union leaders stopped him speaking because they feared he would explain the critical political situation facing teachers and the necessity to fight for an alternative

program to win their demands.

“Teachers can’t rely on these unions and their leaders,” Fernando stated. “They have consistently betrayed us over the past 24 years. Now they are looking for an excuse to call off our current action. That is why they are urging the government to declare that it will merely accept as a principle that salary anomalies be resolved.

“Like all previous regimes, the Rajapakse government has repeatedly rejected our demands. The COVID-19 pandemic has deepened the economic crisis. The unions are tied to capitalism and the establishment, and cannot see beyond this, that’s why they support imposing the economic burden on the masses.”

Fernando said teachers had to take control of their struggle by building action committees in every school, turning to other sections of the working class and fighting for the program elaborated in the July 28 TSPSC statement. “Militancy and protest are important,” he said, “but they alone are inadequate. Teachers must base their struggle on socialist and internationalist policies.”

Such a turn is urgent. Educators are continuing to take action in several parts of the country. On Wednesday, teachers began a 100-kilometre march from Kandy in central Sri Lanka, expecting to reach Colombo this coming Monday. Regional protests have been held, including one on Thursday in Anuradhapura.

The teachers’ struggle is part of a series of strikes and protests in Sri Lanka that have erupted this year involving health, postal and electricity workers in the state sector, and plantation workers in the private sector. This growing movement is in response to the skyrocketing cost of living and job losses which the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**