

Sri Lankan unions embrace government's cabinet committee in preparation to end teachers' wage fight

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Sri Lankan President Gotabhaya Rajapakse once again rejected striking teachers' wage demands at Monday's meeting of cabinet ministers while establishing a cabinet sub-committee to further "study the issue." The subcommittee of four ministers will present its report to next Monday's cabinet meeting.

The teacher unions had previously called on the government to provide a "solution" to educators' demands for higher wages by last Monday. Union officials had assured the government, however, that they "understood the economic crisis" facing the government and politely called for a "policy decision" on teachers' claims.

The so-called "policy decision" is a desperate manoeuvre by the unions which will be used to wind-up the ongoing online learning strike by nearly 250,000 public school educators and principals.

Cabinet spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella told the media on Tuesday that it would cost 70 billion rupees (\$US350 million) annually to settle teachers' wage claims. The sham cabinet sub-committee's role, he asserted, would be to investigate when the government could begin to address the salaries demand, how many years it would take, and other matters.

Instead of rejecting the government's blatant delaying tactic, union leaders readily embraced the proposal. Addressing a media briefing, Ceylon Teachers Union (CTU) secretary Joseph Stalin said: "We do not know if this committee is similar to previous ones [but] we are not coming to any pre-conclusions."

National Association of Principals president Parakrama Weerasinghe said the unions do not want to "shout in the streets" or take any action. The unions were "willing to negotiate," Weerasinghe said, as he appealed for an "agreement" with the government.

Likewise, Mahinda Jayasinghe, leader of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-controlled Ceylon Teachers Service Union (CTSU) claimed that, "Some ministers have spoken with understanding" about the teachers' struggle. "This is a relief for us and we are happy about that," he added.

Yesterday, the teachers' union leadership, along with their counterparts from other unions and the Frontline Socialist Party-affiliated United Teacher Services Union, held a sit-down protest near the Independent Square in Colombo. Union leaders said their protest was to "apply some pressure" on the cabinet sub-committee and the government.

The sub-committee, which includes Wimal Weerawansa, Mahinda Amaraweera and Prasanna Ranatunge, met yesterday and will begin discussions with the teachers' union leadership today.

Teachers should have no illusion that these discussions will resolve their decades-long demand for higher wages. The process is a cynical charade that will be used as a pretext to derail and shut down the teachers' struggle.

Successive governments, including the current Rajapakse regime, aided and abetted by the unions, have rejected teachers' wage demands over the past 24 years. As a result, Sri Lankan teachers are now among the lowest-paid public sector workers in the country.

Following Monday's cabinet meeting, Education Minister G.L. Peiris said there was a "chance" that teachers' salaries claims could be addressed in the next budget. At the same time, he accused the striking teachers of sabotaging online education, delaying examinations and their results.

In fact, the government's online education scheme during the pandemic is a farce. The scheme is not available to most students because they have not been

provided with computers, let alone internet access. Many teachers, moreover, are forced to use their own money to establish online classes in the areas where they can be conducted.

The teachers' online learning strike, which began on July 12, entered its second month yesterday. Over the past month strikers have held numerous protests, including the August 4 motorcade and demonstration outside the presidential secretariat. Demonstrations involving thousands of educators have been held in every district in Sri Lanka.

On August 4, hundreds of teachers also began a 100-kilometre march from Kandy to Colombo. When teachers had walked 70 kilometres to Pasyala, the unions called off the march on August 7 in response to a vicious government and media campaign accusing the protesters of spreading COVID-19. It is not teachers, however, but the government and the ruling class as a whole that are responsible for the pandemic, which has now grown to catastrophic levels.

On Monday, hundreds of teachers in the war-ravaged North held two separate demonstrations—one in Jaffna and another in Point Pedro. Police tried to block protesters, citing quarantine laws, but the teachers defied them. In Jaffna, protesters held a meeting at Weerasingham Hall.

The government has responded to teachers' growing determination to win their demands with brutal police repression. Police arrested 40 teachers and four drivers following a motorcade protest on August 4, detaining them at the Colombo Port Police Station until they were granted bail the following day.

On Wednesday, a group of 26 teachers, parents and students were summoned to appear before a Kandy magistrate court for organising a demonstration in July and the August 4 march to Colombo. They have been accused of breaking coronavirus rules and inciting people, and ordered to appear before the court on November 26.

On August 9, three teachers, including one female educator, were detained by Matara police who held them until they were brought before a magistrate the following day. They were bailed but have to appear in court on August 16. A van driver who transported Jaffna teachers to another protest was also summoned by police on Tuesday.

Police have stepped-up their repression against anyone opposing the government's social attacks. On August 3, police arrested two FSP members, an Inter-University Student Federation convener and three other leading activists. They have been remanded by the courts for

organising a demonstration against the Kotelawala National Defence University Act. This Act will step up the privatisation of public education and further expand militarisation of the country.

Falsely threatening to escalate the struggle, the teachers' unions on Wednesday convened a joint press conference with the leaders of several other unions notorious for betraying their members.

This included Saman Rathnapriya, leader of the Government Nursing Officers' Association, who, along with other health sector union officials, played a key role in shutting down health workers' actions in July. Ceylon Mercantile Industrial & General Workers Union secretary Sylvester Jayakody and Inter-Company Employees Union leader Wasantha Samarasinghe also participated. Jayakody and Samarasinghe supported Rajapakse's reopening of the economy, after limited and inadequate COVID-19 lockdowns, and assisted companies to cut wages and jobs in response to the pandemic.

This alliance has nothing to do with uniting workers in a struggle against the escalating government and employer attacks. Instead, these union officials have decided to hold a series of sit-in protests and joint discussions with leaders of opposition parliamentary parties. This includes parties and leaders of previous governments that opposed granting teachers' legitimate demands.

CTSU leader Jayasinghe told the joint press, "We are now ready to turn this into a broad mass struggle. We ask the government to solve our problems and end this before it happens."

Jayasinghe's so-called "broad mass struggle," however, does not include any unified mobilisation of the industrial strength of the working class to support the teachers' struggle and challenge the government and the capitalist class.



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