

Sri Lankan teacher unions prepare to accept paltry wage rise

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Sri Lankan public school teachers have voiced their outrage over a meagre pay rise announced last week by a special cabinet committee. Around 250,000 teachers have been holding a national online learning strike since July 12 over longstanding demands for higher salaries.

The paltry pay rises were proposed by a cabinet subcommittee appointed by President Gotabaya Rajapakse, who has repeatedly rejected any salary increase for educators. The committee said its proposed increases would be announced in the government's forthcoming November budget and paid in four annual instalments.

While teachers have demanded a 31,000-rupee (\$US150) monthly salary for first grade teachers and 10,000 rupees for newly-recruited lowest grade teachers, the government has only offered 11,000 rupees and 5,000 rupees respectively, with other grades to receive similar small amounts.

A 5,000-rupee allowance will also be paid in September and October to teachers involved in online education. This is a contemptuous manoeuvre to exploit the economic difficulties confronting those involved in the online strike.

In line with union demands, public education will be made a separate "closed service," meaning that employees can only be transferred within the education sector, not to other public sectors. While the unions 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 cabinet committee readily accepted this demand because it opens the way for accelerating its moves to privatise education.

Teachers angrily reacted on Facebook and other social media to the cabinet committee's paltry pay offer and warning unions not to accept it. Comments included: "Don't betray our struggle" and "The government has offered a carrot, one cannot buy even a kilo of saffron

with this scanty allowance." One teacher said: "Let us continue the strike until we will win" and another wrote: "Future generation of teachers will curse us if we accept this."

In defiance of teachers' determination to fight, the unions are engaged in closed-door manoeuvres in a bid to end the strike. Leaders of the educators unions, including the Ceylon Teachers Union (CTU), the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-controlled Ceylon Teacher Services Union (CTSUS) and the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP)-affiliated United Teacher Services Union (UTSU), have held several rounds of discussions with the cabinet committee.

Addressing the media on Wednesday, after the cabinet committee announcements, the Teachers and Principals' Unions Alliance called on the government to issue a "circular" and make the proposed increases in one payment, not four separate instalments.

CTU secretary Joseph Stalin proclaimed the teachers' struggle as one of "the greatest" in recent history and appealed to the government to "offer us a discussion, in order to give us a solution, otherwise, the struggle will continue."

CTSUS secretary Mahinda Jayasinghe said teachers would get a very meagre sum if the proposed increases were paid in four instalments. "We are flexible," he added. "We are ready to accept the offer if it is paid as an entire payment." He appealed to the Sri Lankan finance minister and the president to intervene and "solve the problem." If they failed to do so, the unions would take new measures, he said, but did not elaborate.

UTSU secretary Sanjeewa Bandara demagogically declared that the union was ready to "rally parents, other social forces around this struggle."

Despite their empty rhetoric, the leadership of the teachers' and principals' unions have clearly indicated that they are prepared to accept the government's

“offers,” which are nearly one third less than educators’ demands. Their calls for a meeting with the president and finance minister are a desperate attempt to deflect teachers’ anger.

On July 27, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse told union officials that the government faced an economic crisis and that the government could not grant teachers’ wage demands. The unions acknowledged these concerns and urged him to accept their demands as a “policy” and make the payments in instalments.

Irrespective of whichever party holds power in Colombo, whenever educators fight for higher pay and better conditions, they are told that the government faces economic difficulties, but would increase pay in the future. For decade after decade the unions have embraced these empty promises and shut down teachers’ strikes and protests.

Teachers have not forgotten these betrayals and, in the face soaring cost of living increases, government attacks on social rights and increased indebtedness worsened by the pandemic, have shown increasing militancy. The continuing, almost two-month, online teaching strike, along with protests and demonstrations throughout the country and in central Colombo in defiance of police bans, media denunciations and arrests, testify to educators’ determination and reflects rising working class struggles unfolding in Sri Lanka and internationally.

Addressing the media this week, cabinet subcommittee members defended their proposals and urged teachers to resume work. Committee member Wimal Weerawansa declared that the government “has taken the most reasonable decisions on this issue at a very difficult time” and warned teachers not to ask for “a pound of flesh... like Shylock.”

Feigning concern, the cabinet committee report said the coronavirus epidemic had seriously impacted on “children’s education” and denounced the online teaching strike, claiming that it had created a “frightening picture” for the “children’s future.”

The health and social catastrophe, and the ruining of children’s education, is a direct result of the Rajapakse government and its COVID-19 policies. Like those of its counterparts around the world, Colombo places big-business profits above human life, allowing workplaces to keep operating and for schools to reopen in unsafe conditions, even as the deadly Delta variant surges throughout the country.

Declaring that it has “no money,” the government has refused to provide the computer and internet facilities

needed to carry out online education, compelling teachers to maintain online lessons using their own equipment and at their own expense.

The report cynically declares that the government will have to bear the 70 billion-rupee annual cost of resolving the teachers’ salary problem but avoids any mention of the billions of rupees Colombo has provided in tax cuts, cheap credit and debt relief allowed to big businesses that resulted in record profits.

The Rajapakse government is planning to impose another round of austerity measures on the Sri Lankan masses, with cabinet this week announcing that it will “strictly limit government expenditure.” Finance Minister Basil Rajapakse reportedly told cabinet that state revenue has “drastically decreased” due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and was “not sufficient, even for recurrent expenditure.”

The government and big business circles are currently discussing cuts to the salaries and pensions of the public sector employees in response to the collapse in state revenue. The Rajapakse government also faces a foreign debt crisis exacerbated by the collapse of export earnings, foreign remittances and the tourism industry. In response it has just one policy—to place the entire burden of this crisis on the working people.

Educators must reject the government salary “offers,” which do not take into account the escalating cost of living and are an attempt to make teachers pay for the crisis. Teachers and principals must study and fight for the program of struggle elaborated and published on July 27 by the Teacher-Student-Parent Safety Committee.

It states: “The struggle against Colombo’s attacks, and the defence of living and social rights, requires 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.”



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