

Oppose the police witch hunt of striking teachers in Sri Lanka!

Teacher-Student-Parent Safety Committee
17 September 2021

The following statement was issued on Wednesday by the Teacher-Student-Parent Safety Committee in Sri Lanka. The Rajapakse government is doing everything it can to break the ongoing online learning strike of around 250,000 teachers and principals. The police have intensified their witch hunt, announcing yesterday that they will take "stern action" against anyone who seeks to prevent any teacher willing to participate in online education from doing so.

The government has instigated a systematic police witch hunt of Sri Lankan teachers and principals involved in the more than two-month strike for higher wages. Teachers have rejected the government-offered pittance of a wage increase. This intimidation campaign is aimed at breaking the determination of the teachers to continue their strike until their demands are met.

The Criminal Investigation Department (CID) has sent a letter via area police stations to government divisional secretaries demanding they provide the names of those who organised teachers' demonstrations, their addresses, and the places where the protests were held. Police also want the details of teachers who recently died from COVID-19.

The *Sunday Times* reported on September 12 that police spokesman Senior Superintendent Nihal Talduwa confirmed that an investigation was being conducted to discover whether the teachers died from the coronavirus after joining the recent protests.

The so-called investigation is a crude and reactionary attempt to whip up public opinion against the educators, cynically claiming that their nationwide protests have spread the virus.

The Teacher-Student-Parent Safety Committee (TSPSC) vehemently denounces this victimisation campaign. We urge every section of the working class to come to the defence of teachers, including by issuing statements of protest against the witch hunt.

The poisonous campaign against teachers was initiated by the Podujana Education Service Association (PESA), which is affiliated with the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna. On August 28, *Silumina*, the government-controlled Sinhala weekly, published a report quoting PESA chairperson Vasantha Handapangoda. She claimed that 25 teachers had died from COVID-19 and 400 were infected after participating in protests.

Handapangoda is churning out false propaganda against striking teachers, making statements on an almost daily basis on behalf of the government aimed at sabotaging the industrial action. Rohitha Abeygunawardena, a government minister, repeated Handapangoda's statement on teacher deaths, giving credibility to her allegations.

The claim that the teachers' protests are responsible for spreading COVID-19 in Sri Lanka is false. Everyone knows that the deadly disease is spreading because of the criminal policies of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's government, which has ignored the advice of medical experts, leading to the death of over 11,000 people. Those attempts to blame the strikers should be denounced with contempt.

Workers and the poor in many countries around the world are coming into struggle in response to the criminal policies of the ruling regimes and in opposition to government attempts to impose on the masses the economic crisis worsened by the pandemic.

Sri Lankan teachers are striking for higher wages because every government over the last 24 years, including the current Rajapakse regime, has rejected their demands. The unions have likewise betrayed the teachers, accepting successive false promises from governments, and shutting down strikes and protests. Teachers, like other workers now coming into struggle, face unbearable increases in the costs of living, which have worsened because of the pandemic.

According to CID directives, area police stations have

initiated their actions. The media has reported that the area police head office in Horana has sent letters to divisional secretaries and police stations at Ingiriya, Madurawela and Milleniya in response to protest marches held in Colombo on July 25 and August 4.

On August 4, Colombo Port police arrested 44 teachers heading home after a protest near the Presidential Secretariat in central Colombo. They were falsely charged with breaking quarantine laws and blocking the roads.

The teachers were released on bail the following day, authorities fearing that their jailing would lead to even more widespread opposition. It was later revealed that 26 educators were arrested in Kandy and three others were taken into custody in Matara for allegedly organising educators' protests.

The mainstream media has joined the victimisation campaign, quoting Buddhist prelates denouncing the striking teachers. The prelates and the media claim that children's education is being "destroyed" by the strike and that teachers' salary demands are unjustified because the country faces economic difficulties.

An editorial in the *Island* on Monday entitled "Paid leave for striking teachers et al" demanded the online strikers not be paid.

Attempts are also being made to incite racialist divisions. Last week *Dinamina* published an editorial entitled "Vanakkam Yalpanam Teachers" (Welcome Jaffna Teachers). It claimed that Jaffna teachers were continuing to teach for fifth grade scholarships and Advanced Level examinations, and that education levels in the South, which is predominantly Sinhalese, would "deteriorate" in the coming years.

These reports are bogus and turn the real situation upside down. Teachers in the North and East are actively engaged in the wage struggle. Surveys also reveal that the percentage of students participating in "online learning" is low in the plantation areas, among urban and rural poor, and in the North and the East because of the lack of internet and computer facilities.

Those conducting this vicious propaganda are defending the government and the capitalist system and oppose the struggles of any section of the working class to win their rights.

The Rajapakse government is rapidly preparing autocratic forms of rule in order to take on the working class now coming into struggle. Colombo's proclamation of a state of emergency on August 30, on the pretext of systematically supplying basic food items, is a major step in this direction.

President Rajapakse now has wide-ranging repressive powers under the state of emergency, including outlawing strikes, sacking workers, and banning political parties. Working people in Sri Lanka have suffered many bloody experiences from previous governments' use of emergency laws.

Rajapakse is continuously renewing the "essential public service act," which bans public sector industrial action. Under this act, any violation can be punished, after a summary trial, with harsh jail terms and fines, the seizure of property and the blacklisting of future employment. Those accused of inciting and inducing workers to "break" these regulations will be similarly punished.

Instead of turning to other sections of the working class to defend witch-hunted teachers, the teacher union leaderships have ignored the police threats. Ceylon Teachers Union secretary Joseph Stalin has told the *Times* that the unions are planning to "send a letter asking for clarification" of a statement made by Minister Rohitha Abeygunawardena.

The unions, in fact, are on the verge of accepting a paltry government wage offer, declaring that they are "flexible" and ready to accept if the "increase" is made in one payment, instead of instalments spread over four years.

The Teacher-Student-Parent Safety Committee is launching a campaign to win widespread working-class support against any victimisation of teachers. As a first step, we urge workers and students to declare "Hands off teacher activists! Stop the CID investigation!" and issue statements of support. We also urge the building of action committees at every school to defend the wage struggle and other rights, including free education.

The state witch hunt is part of a broader government attack on the democratic rights of all workers. What is urgently needed is a break from the trade unions and every section of the capitalist class, and development of an independent and unified counteroffensive against the Rajapakse government and the entire capitalist system.



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