Sri Lankan educators support UK parents' school strike

The Teachers-Students-Parents Safety Committee in Sri Lanka
29 September 2021

A meeting yesterday of the Teachers-Students-Parents Safety Committee (TSPSC) in Sri Lanka passed a resolution supporting the October 1 parents' school strike in the UK. Called by Lisa Diaz, a UK parent, the strike is in protest against the unsafe reopening of schools as the COVID-19 pandemic continues. Teachers spoke enthusiastically about the UK strike during the meeting, unanimously passing the resolution.

We publish below comments from two members of the committee.

Mahesh Senanayake, a government schoolteacher said: "I'm very pleased to hear Lisa Diaz's call for a strike and the support that has been rallied around it. I also express my full support for their struggle, which is proving that the working class is not ready to accept anything the government says.

"Parents, students and teachers in Sri Lanka all face the same problems as well as threats to our lives in the near future with the reopening of schools here. As the largest group of workers in this sector we have a huge role to play in opposing the government's criminal policies. Official reports on the pandemic in Sri Lanka do not show the real situation. How can parents push their children into the fire knowing that the real situation is bad?

"The government has been sacrificing people's lives to test whether the situation will get worse. We have already seen how many lives were lost with that. Parents in UK say they are not ready to tolerate it anymore. We must follow this example. Not a single child should be sacrificed for the profit interests of the capitalists."

A government school principal said: "It's a lie to say that children are not affected by this pandemic. There are children I know very well who were fully vaccinated but have been infected with COVID-19. The government has only vaccinated a handful of school children, and they've done that as a pretext to hastily reopen schools.

"If schools are opened under these circumstances the situation will only get worse. The government is going to start with classes with small children, who have not even learned to maintain their own healthcare. As a principal I know clearly that many Sri Lankan schools don't even have adequate sanitation facilities for normal situations, let alone under pandemic conditions.

"The government does not care about any of these serious problems. They want children to be pushed to schools. We should oppose this and support UK parents as an initiative to build the collaboration of the international working class."

Published below is yesterday's TSPSC resolution.

The Teachers-Students-Parents Safety Committee in Sri Lanka fully supports the October 1 strike by parents in the UK to oppose sending their children to schools in unsafe conditions amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This strike must be supported by parents, teachers and students all over the world and taken forward as a part of the struggle for eradication of COVID-19 globally.

The initiative by British parent Lisa Diaz to call for this strike is a very significant step and part of a wider opposition developing among the working class around the world to the criminal policies of the capitalist ruling elites to subordinate human lives to the profit interests of big business.

The Sri Lankan government's push to reopen schools under unsafe conditions is no different from the UK's policy, or any other government in the world. Despite the risk of the pandemic, the Sri Lankan government has opened schools from time to time without any

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proper safety precautions. Since April, however, schools have been closed because of strong opposition from students, parents and teachers.

Putting the lives of Sri Lankan school children at risk again, the government has now decided to resume in-person teaching in schools with fewer numbers of students. This is in line with the government's preparations to begin lifting next week the even limited travel restrictions. The struggle of UK parents will undoubtedly be a crucial experience for Sri Lankan parents in the fight against these government policies.

The Teacher-Student-Parent Safety Committee was established in Sri Lanka to unite teachers, students and parents on a working-class basis to fight the government's premature school reopenings.

More than 250,000 Sri Lankan government schoolteachers, a major component of such a united force, are continuing their more than three-month online teaching strike for higher salaries.

Our committee is taking the lead in fighting for teachers to oppose the reopening of schools as part of their current struggle. The trade unions in Sri Lanka's education sector have not expressed any genuine opposition to the reopening of schools.

While the government keeps accusing the striking teachers of disrupting children's education, it has not spent a single rupee to provide the facilities needed for students to receive online education. These facilities have been provided by the teachers, and at their own expense. The government's callous indifference means that just over 50 percent of Sri Lankan students are able to access online education, which is also seriously hampered by poor network coverage and lack of equipment.

This miserable situation is due to the harsh austerity measures imposed by successive Sri Lankan governments in education, health and other socially-necessary sectors. The lack of ventilation and social distancing in UK schools and pointed to by Lisa as factors leading to a dangerous spread of COVID-19 among children, are severe in Sri Lanka. Over-crowded classrooms and public transportation, as well as poor sanitation, are a clear threat to children's healthcare.

The anti-scientific lie that children are less likely to be infected with coronavirus is being used by all the agencies of capitalist rule—in Sri Lanka and internationally—to justify the reopening of schools and slashing of decent healthcare facilities for children.

As Lisa powerfully declares: "We're sick of the lies. We're sick of the gaslighting. We're sick of you getting scientists to say ridiculous things like children don't catch it at school, they catch it on the bus! It's not good enough. We won't take it anymore."

Her statement that parents must not consent to their children being used in a herd immunity experiment is a powerful and correct position, and equally applies in Sri Lanka, where the government is applying similar measures.

As the Ministry of Education secretary previously declared before reopening schools in Sri Lanka: "Schools will be opened to gain experience in adapting to the new normal in the pandemic."

The initiative taken by UK parents in the fight against the criminality of capitalist governments is a courageous and timely one. Our committee is making every effort to win the support of Sri Lankan teachers at every stage of your struggle. We see this as a vital step in building of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

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