

Sri Lankan teachers take nationwide action, defying government bans

Our correspondents
7 October 2021

On October 6, thousands of striking Sri Lankan teachers and principals demonstrated across the island, including in the war-ravaged North and East, as part of their campaign for higher wages. For the past three months about 250,000 government school teachers have been involved in an online teaching strike to demand decent salaries.

The protests, which coincided with National Teachers Day, were held in 300 education divisions and involved over 200 teachers at each location in spite of minimal efforts by the teachers' unions to organise the events.

Teachers gathered at public places in the morning, chanting slogans against the government and holding placards such as, "Happy teachers' day but teachers are unhappy, pay the salaries entitled to teachers, save free education" and "Stop the victimisation of teachers."

Two weeks ago, Public Security Minister Sarath Weerasekara threatened to "suppress the teachers' strike in the way we destroyed terrorism." Reacting to Wednesday's protests, he declared that the government's response to the strikers had been "too mild" and that "severe action" would be taken in the future. Dozens of teachers were arrested at earlier protests.

The Rajapakse government deployed its henchmen in several areas on Wednesday to intimidate the protesting teachers. Health officials and police attempted to disrupt a demonstration at the Dehiattakandiya education division in the Eastern province, accusing teachers of violating COVID-19 social distancing regulations.

The government, working in conjunction with the media, is also attempting to whip up public sentiment against the teachers, declaring that their wage demands are "unjustified during the pandemic" and falsely claiming that "the education of children has collapsed because of the strike."

The teacher unions' leadership has done nothing to rally working-class support against the government attacks. Wednesday's protests were called instead to divert teachers into more bankrupt appeals to the government.

Addressing a press conference on Tuesday morning, Ceylon Teachers Union (CTU) Secretary Joseph Stalin

apologetically said, "If the government refuses to continue negotiating with us, what else can we do but take to the streets?"

In fact, the unions, which have already made clear they are willing to accept the government's paltry wage offer, are appealing for more talks in order to negotiate a face-saving "promise" from the government and end the strike.

Teachers have demanded a 31,000-rupee (\$US150) increase in the monthly salaries of first grade teachers and a 10,000-rupee rise 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 cabinet subcommittee appointed by President Gotabhaya Rajapakse has said its proposed increases would be announced in the government's forthcoming November budget and paid in four annual instalments.

Indicating the unions' readiness to betray teachers' demands, Stalin told the press conference: "We are not asking for a pound of meat. We have taken a step back. Give us the amount promised by the government at once, without instalments. Give us another discussion to resolve it."

Over the past 24 years, successive governments, including the current Rajapakse regime, aided and abetted by the unions, have rejected teachers' wage demands. As a result, Sri Lankan teachers are now among the lowest-paid public sector workers in the country. The treachery of the unions this time around is no different from the previous two decades.

While the trade unions slavishly beg the government for talks, protesting teachers denounced the government and education authorities for refusing to address their demands. One teacher said: "The rulers are enjoying everything without even looking at our problems." Another told the media that she "curses the rulers."

When police and health officials attempted to disperse their protests, teachers angrily declared, "The government has ignored heavy traffic and congestion everywhere else in the country after lifting [COVID-19] travel restrictions but

now are trying to stop teachers' protests which are being held according to health guidelines."

Addressing a government-organised Teachers Day event, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse cynically declared: "The struggle to win rights of a profession has no boundaries, but the dignity of the teaching profession must be protected at all times... Teachers are responsible to ensure students get back on track." In other words, teachers should end their strike action and accept the government's plans to reopen schools as COVID-19 rages across the country.

On the same day, Murutthettuwa Ananda, a Buddhist monk and leader of the Public Service United Nurses Union (PSUNU), held an all-party conference "to force the government to address teachers' problems." Ananda is a longtime Rajapakse supporter and worked to bring the current government to power.

The PSUNU leader told the event that he was personally phoned the previous day by the Sri Lankan president and prime minister, who called on him to "intervene" in the teachers' struggle. Ananda said that the president asked him to "take this issue into your hands and we will resolve teachers' problems through negotiations." Ananda's admission makes clear that he was acting on behalf of the government to try and suppress the teachers' struggle and end the strike.

Ananda's PSUNU previously directed its members not to join a national strike of more than 90,000 health workers on September 27 for a continuation of pandemic-related special allowances and several other demands.

In early July, he played a central role in shutting down strike action by around 30,000 nurses demanding a 10,000-rupee disturbance, availability and transport allowance, an increased uniform allowance and a five-day working week. Ananda met with Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse on the second day of that strike and agreed to his bogus "promises" and then shut down the nurses' industrial action.

The PSUNU's so-called all-party conference was attended by representatives of previous governments who had rejected teachers' pay demands. These included parliamentary opposition leader Sajith Premadasa from the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and former President Maithripala Sirisena, who along with other factions of the ruling elite fear the teachers' action could become a catalyst for a broader political movement of the working class.

The Teacher-Student-Parent Safety Committee (TSPSC), which was initiated by the Socialist Equality Party, published a special statement addressed to the protesting teachers. Entitled "Defeat the Rajapakse government's repressive policies! Build action committees and rally the support of other workers for the teachers' wage struggle!" it

explained the political challenges facing teachers and how to take forward their fight.

A protesting teacher from Ambalangoda in the Southern Province told the WSWS that "more teachers would have taken part in the protests but they distrust the union leaders." She was surprised that the unions "did not say a word about calling on support from other workers," and added, "This is very essential to defend our struggle."

Another teacher from the Gelioya area in the Central Province said that teachers were protesting because they could not survive on their meagre salaries. "We're involved in this action not because of the unions' calls. In fact, this time the trade unions did not even provide proper publicity [about the protest]. The teachers themselves are participating because they are determined to show that we cannot give up this struggle," he said.

Piradeepan, a teacher from Jaffna, the Northern Province capital, rejected government and media claims that Tamil-speaking teachers in the North were not involved in the strike. "It's a lie that Tamil teachers are not participating in this struggle. Protests are taking place all over Vavuniya, Mannar and Kilinochchi. All teachers are in an equal struggle for survival. To work with satisfaction, teachers need a decent salary. That is a common need," Piradeepan said.

The TSPSC statement called on other sections of the working class to support the teachers. Sri Lankan workers, the statement said, "must unite with the teachers' struggle and build rank-and-file committees independent of the trade unions in schools, neighbourhoods and workplaces and organise other class actions, such as protests and strikes."

These rank-and-file committees, the statement continued, "must fight—not on the bankrupt program of pressuring capitalist governments to win concessions—but for mobilising the industrial and political strength of the working class to overthrow the capitalist system and establish a workers' and peasants' government and for international socialism."

Over the past week, TSPSC members have held discussions on this program with members of several rank-and-file committees in the health sector.



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