

The lessons of Sri Lanka's ongoing three-month teachers' strike

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On October 12, three months after nearly 250,000 teachers began their online education strike for decent salaries, Sri Lankan Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse again rejected their demands in a meeting with union leaders.

Rajapakse has promised to pay just one-third of the teachers' salary demands and in two stages—the first in January 2022 and the second in 2023. The union leadership, which did not oppose this during the meeting, said they would announce their decision the following day, after a "lengthy discussion" among themselves.

While the unions had been hoping to end the strike with false claims of "some kind of a victory," they were compelled to announce, amid massive opposition by teachers to any sellout, that the industrial action will continue.

The government is moving to prematurely reopen schools on October 21, following months-long closures because of COVID-19. The teachers' unions are desperately appealing for a resolution of the salary issue before then.

These developments confirm that the ongoing industrial action of 250,000 government schoolteachers and principals across the country—the longest strike in Sri Lanka in recent times—has reached a critical juncture.

For the past three months, teachers have witnessed consistent refusals by the government to grant a salary increase. The Rajapakse government has responded to every discussion with the unions by declaring it cannot meet teachers' demands because "the economy has collapsed as result of the pandemic." Government representatives have warned teachers not to ask for "a pound of flesh... like Shylock."

In parliament last week, Education Minister Dinesh Gunawardene said the ongoing teachers' salary crisis would be resolved in the 2022 budget but he was "not ready to make the mistake of revealing budget secrets by informing the House of the salary increments to be given to teachers and principals."

Rajapakse's response to union officials on Tuesday, however, makes clear what the "budget secrets" about

teachers' salaries are. This year's Appropriation Bill, indicates that the 2022 budget allocation for education will be just 1 billion rupees (about \$US5 million) higher than in 2021, not enough to fulfil the government's so-called salary increase "promise."

Instead of addressing teachers' demands, President Rajapakse is actively working with pro-government trade unions to force a shutdown of the strike. On October 6, Murutthettuwe Ananda, a pro-government Buddhist monk and leader of the Public Service United Nurses Union (PSUNU), held an "all-party conference" as teachers held nationwide protests in pursuit of their demands.

Ananda told the conference that he had been contacted by the Sri Lankan president and prime minister and advised "to intervene in teachers' problems." The sole aim of this intervention, of course, was to break up the teachers' strike. This was revealed when Ananda urged teachers two days ago to "report for duty on the 21st, without hindering government's preparation to bring children's education back to normal."

Along with these manoeuvres, the government has unleashed repressive measures against teachers. Dozens of teachers have been arrested at previous protests and some have been summoned to the Criminal Investigation Department and to give statements.

Public Security Minister Sarath Weerasekara has also threatened to "suppress the teachers' strike in the way we destroyed terrorism." He declared that the government's response to teachers was "too mild" and promised "severe action" in the future. The government and mainstream media are also attempting to whip up public hostility against 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."

Despite the ongoing witch-hunting and government threats, the alliance of teachers' and principals' unions, which includes the Ceylon Teachers' Union, the Ceylon Teachers' Service Union led by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna and the Frontline Socialist Party-controlled

United Teachers' Service Union, continues to hold discussions with government authorities, desperately seeking any sort of concession in order to end the strike.

From the outset, the alliance agreed with the prime minister's statement that teachers' demands could not be met straight away because of the economy. They then accepted the government's proposed paltry wage rise—just one third of teachers' demand—and asked that it be paid in one instalment, in an attempt to appease teachers.

Over the past 24 years, successive Sri Lankan governments, including the current Rajapakse regime, aided and abetted by the unions, have rejected teachers' wage demands. As a result, teachers are now among the lowest-paid public sector workers in Sri Lanka, and just as they did in the past two and half decades, the unions are preparing another betrayal.

Although the teachers are fighting for a decent living salary, their struggle brings them into conflict with the government's attempts to impose the burden of the worsening economic crisis onto the working class and the oppressed. The Sri Lankan finance minister has directed all ministries to slash expenditure, including no salary incentives for employees and the hiring of new recruits. The government is overseeing massive increases in the prices of essential commodities.

The ongoing teachers' strike, along with walkouts and protests by health workers over the slashing of a pandemic-related monthly allowance, demonstrations by petroleum workers against overtime payment cuts, and upcoming action by the masses against the unaffordable cost of living are part of a growing movement of the working people against government austerity.

Colombo's escalating social assault on the working class is in line with the actions of governments all around the world accompanied by a turn to autocratic forms of rule. The Rajapakse government's imposition of a state of emergency and essential service orders are part of its moves towards a presidential dictatorship based on the military and the promotion of fascistic forces.

The Teacher-Student-Parent Safety Committee (TSPSC), which was established under the political guidance of the Sri Lankan Socialist Equality Party (SEP), is the only organisation which has explained that the way for teachers to win their demands is to rally the rest of the working class in struggle against the government's entire big-business program.

This analysis has been proven correct, time and time again. Bankrupt claims by the trade unions that the government can be pressured into granting teachers demands have come to nothing over the past three months.

As the TSPSC statement explained on July 26:

The struggle against Colombo's attacks, and the defence of living and social rights, require 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 free education.

On this basis, the TSPSC initiated discussions among teachers, gave voice to their opposition on the *World Socialist Web Site*, recruited advanced layers to the TSPSC and held an online public meeting attended by a significant number of striking teachers.

In contrast to the unions, which downplay the real dangers of government-prepared repression, the TSPSC issued a statement condemning the government attacks and called on other workers to defend the teachers' struggle. In line with this, TSPSC members participated in Health Action Committee meetings to discuss the necessity for such a united struggle.

A united movement of the working class must advance—not with the aim of pressuring governments to win concessions—but on the perspective of mobilising the working class to overthrow the capitalist system and establish a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies as a part of the struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally.



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