

Oppose union betrayal of Sri Lankan teachers' wage strike!

Build action committees to fight for better wages and the defence of free education!

The Teacher-Student-Parent Safety Committee
20 October 2021

Last Monday, Sri Lanka's Teachers-Principals Trade Union Alliance announced an end to the 100-day teachers' strike for decent wages and ordered all union members to return to work on October 25. The decision, made without any democratic discussion with rank-and-file teachers, was a slavish response to government claims that it could not pay more than one-eighth of the demanded wage increase.

Under the government's offer, which will take effect in January 2022, the monthly salary increase for a first-grade teacher will be just 3,850 rupees (\$US19) and only 1,250 rupees (\$US6) for a third-grade apprentice teacher. This increase does not even keep pace with the rapidly rising cost of living.

Ceylon Teachers' Union (CTU) General Secretary Joseph Stalin and Mahinda Jayasinghe, secretary of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna-led Ceylon Teachers' Service Union, said the strike, in a show of "strength against government threats," would continue on October 21 and 22 but that all teachers should resume work on October 25.

The shutdown of the determined national online education strike by 250,000 teachers, who for more than three months defied state repression and ongoing government provocations, is a shameful betrayal. In a pathetic attempt to dissipate teachers' anger, the union leadership loudly and demagogically proclaimed that trade union action would continue after October 25 until their demands are met. This is empty rhetoric.

Thousands of teachers have overwhelmingly voiced their opposition on social media, comparing the sellout to the repeated betrayals of the teachers' union over the past 24 years, since 1997, when the demand for a pay rise was originally made. Anger over this betrayal, however, is not enough. Teachers must draw on the political lessons of this and previous struggles and adopt new methods.

From the outset, the Rajapakse government repeatedly declared that teachers' demands could not be granted because of Sri Lanka's economic crisis, which has worsened because of COVID-19. Chanting the same mantra, the government has rejected the claims of every other section of the working class, including those in the health sector who have demanded a special allowance, proper safety equipment and other necessities for workers during the pandemic.

Teachers and other workers have seen this right-wing

government move to impose the full burden of the financial crisis on the masses with cuts in wages, allowances, and jobs and increased productivity demands. This social assault is combined with massive increases in the cost of essential items and new tax hikes even as billions of rupees in relief packages are handed to the large corporations.

Along with the teachers, workers in the health, ports, estates, power and petroleum sectors have been on strike against these attacks. The struggles erupting in Sri Lanka are part of a rising wave of industrial action by the international working class. Like his counterparts around the world, President Gotabhaya Rajapakse is moving towards dictatorial forms of rule.

In defiance of repeated calls by epidemiologists and health scientists for the closure of schools and all non-essential production, the government has allowed industries, such as apparel, to maintain their profit-gouging operations without any concern for the lives of workers. All of the trade unions, including in the education sector, have supported these life-threatening policies. The teachers' union have fully supported government directives that the schools be reopened, threatening the lives of children, teachers and parents.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the Teachers-Students-Parents Safety Committee (TSPSC) have consistently explained that teachers' wage demands directly challenge the Rajapakse government and bring them into conflict with international finance capital, including the International Monetary Fund, which dictates Colombo's policies.

As the TSPSC statement entitled "A program of struggle for the teachers' wage strike in Sri Lanka," published on July 26, explained: "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 statement also stressed that the teachers' struggle had to be waged by an independent political movement of the working class, in unity with workers from other sectors who face the same capitalist attacks.

The teacher-principal trade unions are utterly hostile to this political fight and have continuously insisted that teachers' demands could be met by pressuring the government. They boasted that this pressure now had enormous power because of the large number of education unions involved in the struggle.

Teachers, however, have bitterly witnessed the utter bankruptcy of this perspective, a process replicated in the experiences of workers around the world.

The teachers' 100-day struggle has again demonstrated that the trade unions are bound to the capitalist system head to foot and operate as political instruments of international capital against the working class.

As CTU General Secretary Stalin told an October 14 media briefing, "We do not demand the very pound of flesh and became as flexible as we could." In other words, the union leaders did their "maximum" to reduce teachers' original demands and bring them into line with the dictates of the Rajapakse government and IMF.

The unions, in fact, attempted to call off the strike at the very beginning using a bogus promise from the government that teachers' demands could be achieved through negotiations. The unions, however, were unable to call off the action in the face of strong opposition from teachers over the miserable government offer.

When the dispute dragged on, the government threatened the unions and demanded the strike be stopped. On October 14, Minister of Public Security Sarath Weerasekera warned "strict action" would be taken against union leaders who "interrupted" the reopening of schools.

"Irrespective of whether the reasons for teachers' strike are reasonable or not, it is unjust because it impacts on children," he declared and chillingly threatened to suppress the struggle "like we defeated terrorism"—a statement he had previously issued.

The government and figures like Weerasekera gained the courage to make these threats because of the tacit support of the unions for President Rajapakse's draconian emergency laws and "essential service" regulations. These ban all strike action by more than a million workers in the country's public sector.

Weerasekera seized on baseless claims that non-striking teachers were being threatened and unleashed a Criminal Investigation Department witch-hunt against teachers involved in the industrial action. The bogus allegations were made by Vasantha Handapangoda, chairperson of the Sri Lanka Podujana Education Service Association, which backs the government.

In their attempts to break the strike, the secretary to the local government ministry ordered graduate trainees attached to Divisional Secretariats be employed in schools from October 21.

The government also ordered the deployment of police and troops to all reopened schools. Principals were directed by education authorities to hand over school keys to relevant local education offices, to ensure that the schools were reopened in the absence of principals and teachers. These thuggish actions were clear attempts to forcefully open schools and intimidate teachers and principals.

While the government stepped up its provocations and efforts to suppress the teachers' struggle, the Teacher-Student-Parent Safety Committee responded with calls for workers in other sectors to be mobilised to defend the striking teachers.

The teachers' unions and all other Sri Lankan unions opposed this perspective fearing that such a unity would develop into a political struggle that challenged the government and bourgeois rule. The unions' shutdown of the teachers' strike is the inevitable

outcome of their pro-capitalist policies.

The lessons of the teachers strike make clear that none of the demands of the working class, including a decent living wage for teachers, can be won by pressuring the government. What is required is a united political struggle of the working class against the government and the entire capitalist system, independent of the unions. Teachers cannot allow their struggles to remain in the hands of the unions. They must take this fight into their own hands.

The July 26 TSPSC statement declared:

"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 with the following demands:

- Increase teachers' minimum monthly wage to 60,000 rupees, indexed to the cost of living!
- Full pensions for all teachers!
- Allocation of 10 percent of GDP to public education!
- All teachers and students to be provided with free computers and online facilities!
- No reopening of schools under unsafe pandemic conditions!
- The provision of adequate housing-loan facilities with low interest rates!

"These vitally necessary demands cannot be met under the capitalist profit system. The billions of rupees required can only be found by refusing to pay foreign loans and nationalising the big companies, large estates and the banks under workers' democratic control. A workers' and peasants' government must be brought to power to implement these policies. This struggle can be waged only as part of the struggle for international socialism.

"This is the program advanced by the SEP in Sri Lanka as part of the International Committee of the Fourth International's fight to develop the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees."



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