

Thousands of teachers protest across Sri Lanka despite unions' betrayal

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27 October 2021

Public school teachers and principals protested on Monday in major cities across Sri Lanka, as well as in the tea plantation districts and in the war-torn North and East, as part of their 24-year demand for higher wages. The main protest was held near the Colombo Fort Railway Station and involved more than a thousand teachers.

The demonstrations were called by the trade union alliance of teachers and principals, which includes the Ceylon Teachers' Union (CTU), the Ceylon Teacher Service Union (CTSU), which is led by the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, and the United Teachers Service Union, which is controlled by the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party.

The protests were organised by the unions following their betrayal last week of the 100-day national online teaching strike of about 250,000 teachers and principals. While the unions called Monday's protests to try and cover-up their betrayal, the strong turnout demonstrated, once again, teachers' determination to continue the struggle for better living and working conditions and in defence of free public education.

President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's government has repeatedly rejected the demand for higher wages, insisting that it faced a deep economic crisis. But with the unions unable to end the strike, the government agreed to a small salary increase—one fifth of teachers' original demand to be paid in four installments. Desperate to shut down the strike, the unions readily agreed but asked for it in one installment.

Last week, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse told the union officials that the government would grant the meagre wage rise in three installments. The increase would be announced in the November budget, with the first installment in 2022.

The unions responded by falsely telling teachers that they "rejected" this offer, but then declared the online strike would end on October 21 and directed teachers to

report for work in the primary departments of schools on October 25. The government had already announced the reopening of 5,000 primary sections in schools with fewer than 200 students from October 21.

On Monday, protesting teachers chanted for higher wages, an end to education privatisation, six percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to be spent on education, full facilities for educators and students for online education, and no state repression of teachers.

The Rajapakse regime has intensified its privatisation of education and successive governments have slashed spending to about 1.5 percent of GDP. The government has also failed to provide facilities for online education to teachers who have been forced to pay for this from their meagre salaries. Teacher activists have been arrested by the police, on the orders of public security ministers, for organising protests.

Demonstrating teachers on Monday in Kurunegala, the North-Western Province's main city, surrounded Governor Raja Kollure's office in protest against his call for striking teachers to be disciplined and their salaries cut. Kollure, who is president of the Sri Lankan Communist Party, was appointed governor by President Rajapakse. The Stalinist party, which is a partner in the ruling coalition, has a long history of supporting government attacks on social conditions and democratic rights.

Rajapakse's decision to reopen the primary section of schools with less than 200 students, which was fully supported by the unions, is the first step towards the full reopening of all schools under conditions where COVID-19 is still sweeping across the country. From the outset, the unions, like education unions in the US and elsewhere, have backed the reopening of the economy and the schools, following brief lockdowns, placing the lives of thousands of teachers and students in danger.

Overcrowded classrooms in Sri Lanka and the highly-

congested public transport system are creating the conditions for a rapid spread of COVID-19 across the island. Many students from poverty-stricken families with no income cannot even provide masks for their children.

At the Colombo demonstration on Monday, CTSU leader Mahinda Jayasinghe claimed that the teachers' struggle had begun "a new round," adding, "if our demands are not met in the next budget, massive action will be taken."

Jayasinghe's posturing is completely bogus. The government had already announced that it would only pay one fifth of teachers' salary demand and in three installments. The systematic betrayal of teachers by the unions over the past 24 years means that Sri Lankan educators are among the lowest-paid public sector workers on the island.

The Rajapakse government's forthcoming budget, irrespective of the teachers' meagre pay rise, will see a full-scale assault on the social position of the working class.

Sri Lankan Finance Minister Basil Rajapakse has already directed all ministries to slash expenditure, including no salary incentives for employees or the hiring of new recruits. The government has also massively increased the price of essential commodities, greatly increasing the social hardships of workers and the poor. These measures will bring every section of the working class, including teachers, into struggle to defend their living and social conditions.

Education, health, postal, ports, railway and plantation workers have been involved in strikes and protests in recent months, indicating the emerging and socially explosive situation in Sri Lanka.

The Teacher-Student-Parent Safety Committee (TSPSC) and the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) are the only organisations that have explained why and how teachers must unite with the rest of the working class in a political struggle against the government's reactionary policies. We have insisted that while militancy is important it is inadequate to deal with the political challenges facing teachers. The SEP and TSPSC has urged teachers to take their struggle into their own hands by developing and expanding action committees in unity with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees and fighting for socialist policies.

Several teachers spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* during Monday's protests.

A teacher from Maskeliya said: "The government has opened the schools without any safety measures in place

for the COVID-19 pandemic, which is very dangerous for teachers and students. The rulers don't bother about that but just want to break our strike. Most of our school students are plantation workers' children, which in the present situation is a real burden for them to buy a mask for children.

"Teachers have to do everything, including school cleaning and other safety measures, to try and deal with the pandemic, and sometimes have to use their own money from their low salaries. The plantation trade unions are supporting the government and companies. Some of these union officials are ministers and don't care about these things."

A teacher from Agarapatana said: "This time teachers have united very strongly to win their demands. I'm a grade one teacher and my basic salary should be 90,000 rupees but all I get now is 40,000 rupees.

"Authorities are supposed to pay me about 4.8 million rupees in arrears but none of this will be paid. All other teachers face a similar situation. Today I met the parents of students from my school and I explained our struggle to them. They were very sympathetic. I agree with your proposal for organising action committees of teachers, students and parents in every school and that we must unite with teachers in struggle internationally."

A teacher from Kandy said: "A majority of the teachers haven't joined the trade unions and the reason is because the unions have not intervened among us regularly. I'm involved in this struggle because of the difficulties trying to live on my salary, which is about 50,000 rupees and is never fully paid. Like almost all other teachers a large part of my salary is deducted to pay off several loans."

Greshan, a Colombo mathematics teacher, said: "We've been on strike for more than three months and what is finally happening now is what the government wants. Teachers have had to go back to work without any salary hike. Many teachers oppose the unions' decisions. Given the magnitude of the government's economic crisis, can we accept that they cannot allocate any money for the well-being of workers? It's very clear that nothing can be won within the capitalist system."



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