

Sri Lankan teachers' unions shut down all protests

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18 November 2021

Addressing the Sri Lankan media on Sunday, leaders of the Teachers' and Principals' Trade Union Alliance (TPTUA) announced that they were ending all protests, declaring that teachers had won a "victory" in their long struggle for higher wages.

The "victory" claim of the Alliance is a cynical attempt to cover up its sellout deal with the government and its betrayal of the determined wage struggle by about 250,000 teachers.

The Alliance's decision to call off a series of limited protests followed Finance Minister Basil Rajapakse's proposed budget allocation on November 12 of 30 billion rupees for a meagre salary increase for teachers and principals, starting in January 2022.

Union members demanded a 31,000-rupee (\$US155) monthly increase for grade one teachers, 11,000 rupees for grade three new recruits, and increases for other grades.

The government's proposed increase is just one third of these amounts, with grade one teachers receiving only a 11,820-rupees rise, new recruits 3,750 rupees and other grades similar small amounts. Monthly increases demanded for principals—grade one and grade three principals—were 29,850 rupees and 22,518 rupees respectively. They will be given just 12,020 rupees and 6,895 rupees.

The TPTUA is made up of 35 different principals' and teachers' unions and include the Ceylon Teachers Union (CTU), the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-controlled Ceylon Teacher Service Union (CTSU) and the United Teacher Service Union (UTSU), which is led by the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP).

President Gotabhaya Rajapakse repeatedly declared throughout the dispute that the educators should not be given any pay rise, citing the country's economic

crisis. But as teachers' protests and their online education strike continued, he appointed a committee to "look into" teachers' salaries. The committee eventually offered an "increase" equal to one third of the educators' original claims to be paid in three installments, beginning next year.

The Alliance responded by accepting the meagre offer, dropping the original wage demand but appealing for a one-time payment of the amount.

On October 21, it ended the more than 100-day online teaching strike and ordered teachers to report for work from October 25. Its betrayal was in line with the government's reopening of primary sections of about 5,000 schools that had been closed for months in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In an attempt to cover up its obvious betrayal, the unions held a series of limited protests.

On November 10, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse and Finance Minister Basil Rajapakse met with TPTUA leaders and said the government would grant its miserable pay increase as a one-time payment in January.

Finance Minister Rajapakse said the government was making the onetime payment because it wanted to improve children's education and that this was supported by the trade unions. Four days later on November 14, officials from the 35-member Alliance held a so-called "conference of teachers representatives" that decided to end all protests and demonstrations. The event was not a "conference" of democratically-elected teachers' representatives but dominated by bureaucrats.

Justifying its shutdown of all action, the union leaders cynically claimed they would give the government until January 20 to pay the increase. "Otherwise, we will not hesitate to resume the trade union struggle," CTU

General Secretary Joseph Stalin declared.

CTSU General Secretary Mahinda Jayasinghe claimed teachers had been “able to achieve a temporary victory.” Likewise, UTSU leader Sanjeewa Bandara glorified the government’s salary increase promise as a victory. “We have shown the government what we can do by mobilising the unity of teachers,” he said.

All talk of a teachers’ “victory” is a patent lie. The deal between the Alliance and the government is an outright betrayal, orchestrated to shut industrial action by teachers amid a rising wave of workers’ struggles across the island. The last weeks have seen a series of strikes and protests by port, power and petroleum, health and government administration employees, as well private sector employees.

The Rajapakse regime, in line with governments around the world, needed the educators’ unions to ensure that schools were reopened, even as the pandemic continued to rage across the country. Like their trade union counterparts in other countries, the Sri Lankan teachers’ unions fully backed the dangerous reopening of schools. This has led to hundreds of students and teachers being infected with COVID-19 throughout the country since October 22, forcing authorities to close numerous classes.

Finance Minister Rajapakse’s claims in meetings with TPTUA leaders last week that the government is investing in education are bogus. The 2022 budget allocation for education is just 127 billion rupees, 39 billion rupees less than the 166 billion allocated in 2019, and just one billion rupees more than the 126 billion for 2021. Sri Lankan governments now only spend about 1.2 percent of gross domestic product on education.

Contrary to the unions’ trumpeting about “victory,” the real value of the paltry wage increase has already been wiped out by rampant inflation produced by the government removal of price controls on all essentials, shortages of goods and black-market profiteering. Last week’s austerity budget contained even harsher austerity measures and will further drive up the cost of living.

The fight against this broad-ranging assault involves a political struggle against the Rajapakse regime, and the entire ruling elite, on the basis of a socialist program. The trade unions, which function as an industrial police force of the capitalist class, are

determined to suppress such a struggle. This is graphically confirmed in their betrayal of the teachers’ long-running wage fight.

The Teacher-Student-Parent Safety Committee (TSPSC) and the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) have intervened in every turn of the teachers’ dispute, explaining to educators that they had to take control of their struggle, independent of the unions, and build action committees in every school and institutions.

The TSPSC and Socialist Equality Party also explained the need for educators to reach out to other sections of working class in Sri Lanka and in unity with their international class brothers and sisters. We urge teachers, students and parents to study this political analysis, build action committees and join this struggle.



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