

Teachers throughout Sri Lanka join one-day strike against the Rajapakse government

Our correspondents
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More than 250,000 teachers took part in a one-day strike on Monday demanding the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapakse and also for relief from transport difficulties facing teachers and students due to acute fuel shortages and soaring prices.

The strike took place as part of weeks of widespread protests by working people, youth, professionals and the rural poor demanding the resignation of the Rajapakse government and against skyrocketing price increases of essential food, medicine and fuel as well as lengthy electricity outages every day.

Teachers took strike action across the island cutting across the poisonous communalism promoted by the political establishment for decades to divide the working class. Hundreds of teachers took part in demonstrations in Colombo, Kalutara and Kandy despite the advice of the trade unions to stay at home.

The trade unions only called the strike as a means of defusing mounting anger among teachers who face all the difficulties confronting other sections of workers. The attendance of teachers and students at schools has been disrupted by the lack of fuel and public transport. During the past two weeks, student attendance has dropped by about 50 percent. High food prices have meant an increasing number of students come to school with an empty stomach.

While teachers joined the strike to fight for their democratic and social rights against the government, the trade unions are attempting to divert the struggle behind the opposition parties—the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB). It was called by the Teacher-Principal Trade Union Alliance that includes the Ceylon Teachers' Union (CTU), Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-affiliated Ceylon Teacher Service Union (CTSU) and the United Teacher Service Union (UTSU) controlled by the

Frontline Socialist Party (FSP).

In its media statement, the union alliance declared that the main aim of the strike was “pressurising the inefficient government to resign” but remained silent on an alternative. This leaves the door open for the “interim government” advocated by the SJB and JVP to prepare for new elections. These opposition parties, however, support the negotiations with the IMF for an emergency bailout that will inevitably come with demands for draconian austerity measures that will only intensify the social catastrophe facing working people.

In the meantime, the teacher unions are proposing cosmetic measures. On April 21, it called on the Education Ministry to allow teachers and students to report to a nearby school “until the crisis is ended.” The alliance called the strike after the Ministry refused this demand, but it deliberately worked to isolate teachers from other workers by telling them to stay at home and report in sick.

Late last year, the same unions betrayed a strike of more than 100 days by hundreds of thousands of teachers demanding a substantial wage rise, by agreeing to the pitiful increase granted by the government and claiming it as a “victory.” Amid the country’s escalating economic turmoil, the union leaders declared: “We have understood the crisis of the government, so we became flexible and did not ask for the pound of flesh.” At the same time, their leaders offered full support to the government’s unsafe reopening of the schools demanded by big business allowing COVID-19 to spread through the population.

CTU general secretary Joseph Stalin told a press briefing on April 23: “We request [the government] to listen to the message of the strike on [April] 25. If it is not done, we will hold a general strike on [April] 28 and a hartal [general strike and closure of business] on

May 6.” CTSU leader Mahinda Jayasinghe boasted on the same day: “We will use our heavy armour of strikes. We will send the government home.”

Teachers should have no faith in these treacherous, pro-capitalist bodies. Their empty rhetoric is to disguise the fact that they have no intention of conducting a political struggle against the profit system that is the source of the attacks on the social position of working people. As they did last year, the unions aim to confine any struggle within the safe channels of parliamentary politics.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the Teachers-Parents-Students Action Committee (TPSAC), formed at the SEP’s initiative, intervened in the strike, fighting to mobilise teachers in a united movement of the working class based on socialist policies against the Rajapakse government.

TPSAC Secretary Kapila Fernando, a member of the SEP Political Committee, issued a video statement in support of striking teachers. Fernando said: “The working class, including teachers, needs to fight for its own independent class solution without stopping at overthrowing the Rajapakse government. The solution is to break from bankrupt program of unions of pressurising capitalist governments, and fighting for a government of workers and peasants which will be committed to socialist policies in unity with the working class internationally.”

Fernando explained the treacherous role of the unions in repeatedly betraying the struggles of workers, including teachers. He urged teachers to establish action committees independent of the unions to fight for their rights.

SEP members spoke to teachers at Monday’s protests.

Mayura Ekanayake, a teacher at the Gannoruwa Ranabima School in Kandy, explained that he was unable to properly plan his classes as he had to spend hours in queues for fuel. He criticized the unions, saying: “If unions called protests throughout the country, thousands of teachers would join in all cities and towns. But unions avoided it.

“Now it is much clearer that the meagre salary increase granted [last year] by the Rajapakse government to teachers was not a victory. We can’t bear this high cost of living. What the SEP said at the time was correct. The working class should not accept

the meagre amounts granted by capitalists but needs to form action committees and fight for a socialist program to win what they want.”

A female teacher from Hingurakgoda in north central province explained the difficulties confronting teachers and students: “Only half of our students attended school during recent months. The attendance of teachers was also down. They had to spend hours making their way to school due to the lack of transport. Some spent whole nights at petrol stations to get fuel. All are under immense pressure. Last Wednesday, at the morning assembly in our school, seven or eight children fainted due to the lack of food.”

She commented on current anti-government protests: “All are demanding ‘Gota [the president] go home’. The unions and all the opposition parties are making that demand. But they are silent on the alternative. What type of change will it be? I agree that we need our own government. We, who are suffering, must unite and build our own government.”



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