

Sri Lankan president threatens to impose essential services orders banning strikes on teachers

Our reporters
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On Thursday, President Ranil Wickremesinghe threatened to invoke the anti-strike Essential Public Services Act (EPSA) against all teachers. The attack came a day after around 500 teachers and principals from across Sri Lanka demonstrated in Colombo.

The Wednesday morning protest in front of the Colombo Fort railway station was called over the government's anti-democratic dissolution of the Teachers Transfer Board (TTB). The decision has affected the transfers of about 12,000 teachers and principals.

Wickremesinghe issued his anti-strike threat during a speech at the Colombo Sanghamitta Girls' School. He declared that he would not allow school children to be taken hostage by various groups. "Education is a model that should come from the school. School principals and teachers should set an example," Wickremesinghe said.

The full provision of education, including the holding of exams, cannot be "disrupted" or subject to "sabotage," the president continued, warning that if the teachers' protests continued his government would legislate to make education "an essential service."

Wickremesinghe's threats make clear that the government will not hesitate to use state repression to impose the International Monetary Fund's austerity demands. It is a warning, not just against teachers, but the entire working class.

On February 28, the government decreed that Sri Lankan ports and transport services, including bus, rail and air travel, were part of the Essential Public Service Act (EPSA).

The EPSA was imposed on the health, petroleum, and electricity sectors several months ago.

The March 22 teachers' protest was organised by several unions, including the Ceylon Teachers' Union (CTU), the Ceylon Teachers' Services Union (CTSUS) which is affiliated with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), and the All Island United Teachers' Union (AIUTU). Demonstrators carried placards stating, "No political interference in teacher transfers!" and "Oppose the improper intervention of the President."

In line with previous government directives, the police secured an order from the Colombo Fort Magistrate's Court stopping protesters marching towards Galle Face Green, the Presidential Secretariat, the President's House and the Ministry of Finance. The order was read out to protesting teachers by a senior police officer.

As well as the usual heavy police presence, the government organised two groups of about 50 provocateurs, mainly drawn from right-wing middle-class elements and oppressed layers in Colombo.

Calling themselves the "Alliance for Children's Future," the groups chanted slogans against protesting teachers, accusing them of disrupting education. Their slogans included: "The father who destroyed education is [CTU Secretary] Joseph Stalin," "Chase away Secretary Joseph Stalin," "Stop disruptive teachers' strikes" and "Hands off children's right to education."

Alliance for Children's Future secretary Indika Rajapakse told the media: "A teacher's strike is not necessary at this moment. Children's education has been disrupted for three years."

CTU secretary Stalin told the media that the provocateurs had been instigated by Vajira Abeywardana, a United National Party lawmaker and the current cabinet minister of home affairs.

Denouncing Abeywardana as the president's "stooge," Stalin said teachers' protests would not be disrupted by these organisations.

Wickremasinghe's bogus claims, against teachers and his government's mobilisation of provocateurs, shows that the government is preparing for a crackdown against the growing struggles of working class. Teachers need to join with other sections of the working class in a united struggle to defend their social and democratic rights against the government's austerity measures and its onslaught on civil liberties.

Notwithstanding their demagogic rhetoric, the CTU, CTSU and AIUTU leaders who organised Wednesday's protest, have consistently worked to prevent a unified mobilisation of the working class against the government attacks.

Beginning in late 2021, about 200,000 teachers staged a 100-day strike to demand higher salaries. This was carried out in defiance of repressive measures by the Rajapakse government. The teachers' courageous and militant action was betrayed by the unions, who forced an end to the strike following a government promise to grant only one third of teachers the increased salary demand.

Together with the rest of the Sri Lankan trade union movement, the teachers' unions leadership helped derail the mass uprising against the Rajapakse regime. They played a key role in diverting this movement behind proposals for an interim government called for by parliamentary opposition parties such as the Samagi Jana Balawegaya and the JVP. This paved the way for the Wickremesinghe government, which is pressing ahead with the agenda Rajapakse was trying to impose.

Teachers need to take their struggle for decent wages, working conditions and increased funding for high quality education into their own hands by forming action committees, independent of the unions and all the bourgeois parties.

The Teachers-Students-Parents Action Committee, which was formed on the political initiative of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), fights to unite teachers, students and parents in a common struggle against the escalating government attacks. It is ready to provide all the necessary assistance and guidance required by teachers.

The SEP has launched a campaign to build a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and

Rural Masses based on independent action committees of workers and rural toilers throughout the island. This is a first step in the fight for a government of workers and peasants committed to socialist policies. We call on teachers to join with the SEP in this struggle.

WSWS reporters last Wednesday spoke with protesting teachers at the Fort station.

An English teacher from a Colombo school explained how the dissolution of the TTB had impacted on teachers at her school. "Teachers have asked for transfers on humanitarian grounds. But these have been lost due to the arbitrary activities of some people. Teachers have come here today to get justice for that. We want to talk about the government arbitrarily blocking teacher transfers," she said.

"I'd also requested a transfer but that was stopped. I worked in a school in Colombo for ten years and my transfer request was within Colombo itself. There are large numbers of teachers who have also completed ten years at my school," the teacher added.

"Children coming to school face so many problems and we all know how much it costs for parents just to send [their children] to school," she said.

A science teacher with 17 years' experience from Sumangala Girls' School in Panadura, 27 kilometres south of Colombo, said he was not currently impacted by the transfer issue. However, he decided to join the protest because it was a matter of principle. The violation of teachers' transfer rights, he said, was "part of the big attacks by the IMF, along with global capital."

He denounced the government's ongoing social attacks and its organisation of provocateurs to try and undermine the teachers' protest. "They [the government] are trying to disrupt this struggle by bringing in those lumpen groups," he said.



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