

President Wickremesinghe threatens to declare education an “essential service”

Defend Sri Lankan teachers’ right to strike!

Pani Wijesiriwardena
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On March 23, Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe publicly declared that his government could make education an “essential service.” The threat was issued in a speech at Sanghamitta Girls School and just one day after teachers protested in Colombo against the government’s anti-democratic decision to abolish “teacher transfer boards.”

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) condemns Wickremesinghe’s bullying and urges the entire working class to come forward to defend teachers’ right to strike.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* stated in an article on March 24: “Wickremesinghe’s threats make clear that the government will not hesitate to use state repression to impose the International Monetary Fund’s [IMF] austerity demands. It is a warning, not just against teachers, but the entire working class.”

Wickremesinghe arrogantly proclaimed that school principals and teachers should “set an example” and focus on their own “behaviour” and “responsibilities.” The full provision of education, including the holding of examinations, he continued, cannot be “disrupted” or subject to “sabotage,” he continued.

Wickremesinghe declared that he would not allow school children to be “taken hostage” by various groups and warned that if teachers’ protests continued his government would legislate to make education “an essential service.”

Accusing workers of taking “hostages” is constantly used by the ruling class and its media mouthpieces to whip up hostility against workers fighting for their rights and to justify government repression.

Patients are allegedly taken “hostage” whenever health workers take action to defend their jobs, wages

and conditions; passengers are hostages when railway workers go on strike; and electricity customers are hostages if power workers protest or take industrial action. Every struggle of the working class is now deemed to be a “hostage-taking” exercise.

Wickremesinghe’s pathetic accusations are a desperate attempt to divert attention from the president’s past and present actions. In a blatant attack on democratic rights, Wickremesinghe deprived Sri Lankan citizens of their right to vote by blocking budgetary-allocated finances for the scheduled March 9 local government elections.

Under Sri Lanka’s constitution, workers employed in sectors deemed to be “essential” have no right to strike. The government has draconian legal powers to impose severe punishment, including sackings, imprisonment, and seizure of their property, on anyone violating this ban.

Wickremesinghe has already declared several sectors “essential services,” banning all strike action. On February 28, his government declared Sri Lankan ports and transport services to be essential, including bus, railway, and air travel, essential services. Last year essential service orders were imposed on health, petroleum and power sector workers.

Sri Lanka’s capitalist media has fully endorsed Wickremesinghe anti-strike threats against teachers. An editorial in the March 24 edition of the *Island* declared: “Workers must fight for their rights. If they don’t, who else will? But they must not ignore their responsibilities. Most of all, they must not test people’s patience.”

In other words, the *Island* approves Wickremesinghe’s threats and says nothing about the

ongoing government mobilisation of heavily armed police and goons against workers coming into struggle. On March 22, the government organised two groups of about 50 right-wing provocateurs to threaten protesting teachers in Colombo.

Mired in an unprecedented economic crisis, the Wickremesinghe government and the ruling elite regard the IMF's \$2.9 billion bailout loan as the only solution for Sri Lankan capitalism. Committed to the IMF's austerity demands, the government is determined to crush all working-class resistance.

This is demonstrated by the barrage of repressive measures introduced by the Wickremesinghe regime since it was undemocratically elevated into government last year.

As well as declaring most public sector services "essential" and cancelling the local government election, the government has used the Prevention of Terrorism Act to imprison anti-government activists and unleashed police attacks on protests and demonstrations. The abolition of the teacher transfer boards is another of the escalating assaults on the social and democratic rights of workers and the oppressed masses.

The president accuses teachers and principals of taking students hostage, but in reality, the working masses have been made hostages to the IMF, with the Wickremesinghe government acting as its policeman. This was made clear last Tuesday by Peter Breuer, the IMF's mission chief in Sri Lanka, who told the media: "Sri Lanka will be the first country in Asia to undergo a governance diagnostic exercise by the IMF" and it will be "a brutal experiment."

Wickremesinghe's concerns about students' education are a complete fraud. He is committed to destroying what's left of public education and health by slashing government funding and drastically cutting state expenditure. Under current proposals, there will be no replacements for an estimated 30,000 teachers due to retire at the end of this year, worsening the already acute teacher shortages. Grave scarcities of physical resources in schools, including buildings, will also increase, along with other cost-cutting measures.

At the same time hyperinflation, now officially at 50 percent, has heavily impacted the masses, making it impossible to buy basic school items and provide adequate daily food requirements, or deal with higher

government taxes.

The government's anti-democratic attacks and IMF measures can only be defeated through an independent political counteroffensive of the working class against the capitalist profit system. The parliamentary opposition parties, the trade unions and pseudo-left organisations, like the Frontline Socialist Party, consciously oppose such a movement and promote illusions that these attacks can be reversed by pressuring the government.

The joint statement of workers action committees in Sri Lanka issued on March 14 explained: "If our struggles remain under the control of the trade unions, which are bound by a thousand threads to the capitalist system, we will certainly be betrayed. The fight for our rights must be taken into our own hands. This can only be done by building workers' action committees in every workplace, factory, plantation and in our neighbourhoods independent of the trade unions and all the capitalist parties."

These action committees must fight for abolition of the essential public service act, repeal of the Prevention of Terrorism laws and abolition of the executive presidency, as well as the defence of all basic democratic rights, including the right to strike.

The SEP is campaigning for the building of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses based on democratically elected delegates from these action committees. Such a congress will provide the political means for the working class to mobilise its strength and rally the rural poor in the fight for a government of workers and peasants committed to socialist policies.



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