

Sri Lankan president threatens protesting teachers with draconian attacks

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On Wednesday last week, Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe gave a one-week ultimatum to school and university teachers who were boycotting the evaluation of students' university entrance exams.

Speaking at a meeting with education ministry officials, Wickremesinghe warned that he would declare education an essential service covered by emergency laws and bring legal action against teachers if they failed to report for evaluation of exams within a week. He said, "All those who marked the papers last time, must be available for service now."

Wickremesinghe's threat is a warning to the entire working class of how his government will deal with any opposition to its brutal assault on their social rights through IMF-dictated austerity.

Tens of thousands of schoolteachers are involved in marking the exam answer scripts, which is supervised by university teachers.

On March 9, a nationwide strike was called by the Federation of University Teachers' Associations (FUTA) to protest the government's recent increase to tax on salaries and other issues. Although the FUTA ended its strike on April 12, the boycott on marking continues.

School teachers involved in the action are demanding that the daily allowance for marking the exam scripts be increased from 1750 to 3000 rupees. Because of the low pay, according to one report, while 19,000 teachers are needed to carry out the marking, only 12,000 have applied. There are not enough for subjects like chemistry, physics and combined mathematics.

The teachers' demands come into direct conflict with the Wickremesinghe government's austerity agenda, which includes substantial cuts to workers' real incomes. An IMF statement noted: "The authorities will develop strategies to limit growth in the public

sector wage bill and public pension spending. ... [They] have decided to restrain wage and pension increases to well below inflation in 2023."

Denouncing the teachers, Wickremesinghe declared: "You can't stop the education of the children." As president and also as prime minister, Wickremesinghe has been responsible for slashing the education budget. While he now sheds crocodile tears about the advanced-level students, government austerity resulted in power outages during the recent exams.

Repeated cuts by successive governments have produced a shortage of 60,000 schoolteachers. When university students protested a lack of facilities due to cutbacks in the sector, the government deployed the police to brutally attack them.

Wickremesinghe's April 19 threat was only the most recent in a series of attacks on educators. On March 23, one day after teachers protested in Colombo against the government's undemocratic decision to abolish "teacher transfer boards," he warned that his government could make education an "essential service." As the Socialist Equality Party wrote, "Wickremesinghe's threats make clear that the government will not hesitate to use state repression to impose" IMF austerity.

Essential service orders have been issued to block recent strike action. The day before a strike and protests involving half a million workers from both public and private sectors on March 1, the government declared ports and transportation services, such as bus, train, and air travel as essential services, effectively banning workers from striking. Last year, employees in the power, oil and health sectors were also subject to essential service orders.

This time, the president went further. He warned: "I will prosecute [protesting teachers] and confiscate their

property also.” In light of Wickremasinghe’s political record, the working class should take this as a serious warning. Wickremesinghe was baptized during the defeated July 1980 general strike, when the United National Party (UNP) government sacked around one hundred thousand public sector workers to break the stoppage. Wickremesinghe was also a senior cabinet minister when the UNP government unleashed pogroms against rural youth during the 1989–1990 period, killing around 60,000.

The Colombo government’s hostility toward the schoolteachers is not accidental. The ruling elite has not forgotten the three-month-long strike by nearly 250,000 teachers and principals from July to October 2021, the longest strike in Sri Lanka in recent times. Consistent refusals by the government to increase salaries led to greater militancy and determination among teachers, but the unions betrayed the struggle, citing a promise made by then Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse to pay just one-third of the teachers’ salary demands in two stages—the first in January 2022.

Wickremesinghe’s threat of draconian action has support across the political establishment.

The main opposition party, the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), condemned FUTA for asking for special tax breaks. SJB Matale District MP Rohini Kaviratne asked how FUTA could hold students hostage and accused university teachers of having jeopardized the future of 1.2 million students by striking. The SJB’s line-up with Wickremesinghe flows from its bipartisan support for the IMF-dictated austerity measures.

The Sri Lankan working masses are being driven into struggle as part of the radicalization of the working class throughout the world, driven by soaring living costs and worsening conditions. In response, Sri Lanka’s ruling elite is rapidly adopting dictatorial methods.

The attack on the education sector workers is part of Wickremesinghe’s agenda of steamrolling any opposition by working people and establishing a presidential dictatorship. Without sweeping attacks on democratic rights, the Colombo government cannot implement the extremely unpopular austerity demands.

The SEP warned in a statement on April 17, “Wickremesinghe’s plan to have the IMF program written into the country’s law is a menacing threat

against the working class and the poor, outlawing any action against its harsh measures.” It also warned that the new Anti-Terrorism Bill has been designed to brutally suppress opposition under the guise of fighting “terrorism.”



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