

“School expenses are unbearable”—Students, parents and teachers denounce Sri Lankan government

Our correspondents
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The government is brutally imposing the burden of Sri Lanka’s economic collapse onto the backs of workers and the poor.

Working under the direction of the International Monetary Fund, President Ranil Wickremesinghe’s government is slashing spending to public health, education and other essential social services, removing subsidies, increasing taxes on workers, moving to privatise hundreds of state-owned enterprises and destroy tens of thousands of jobs.

These attacks and ongoing increases in the cost of living have drastically affected public education and the ability of parents to educate and even properly feed themselves and their children. Many children are going hungry and are dropping out of school.

According to a United Nations Development Programme report on Sri Lanka this month, approximately 12.34 million people or 55.7 percent of the Sri Lankan population of 22.16 million are “multidimensionally vulnerable”—i.e., face extreme levels of poverty.

In May, the Wickremesinghe government’s “Sectoral Oversight Committee in Alleviating the Impact of the Economic Crisis” revealed that “one in every three school students in the country does not get an adequate breakfast. Out of a total 4.5 million school students, at least 1.4 million children fall under this category.”

Government cuts and hyperinflation have led to a drastic rundown of education facilities and the increasing inability of parents to pay for the education of their children.

Huge increases to the costs of books, shoes, uniforms, and other school accessories, as well as food expenditure and transport fares, have seriously impacted the education of children in poverty-stricken rural and urban poor communities.

An exercise book set, which is necessary for primary through to ordinary level school classes, has risen to 5,000 rupees (\$US15), a more than 100 percent increase on its 2020 price.

School bags, shoes, water bottles and other essential accessories have also seen major cost hikes. Increased bus fares have impacted on students and teachers alike, while the now prohibitive cost of domestic electricity limits nighttime study.

Inadequate school funding by consecutive Sri Lankan governments has forced parents to contribute to annual school development funds to pay for necessary repairs to school premises, construct new buildings and facilities and buy other necessities. Annual contributions to school development funds have increased in line with rising inflation.

The Teacher-Student-Parent Action Committee (TSPAC), an independent rank-and-file committee established under the political guidance of the Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka, recently spoke to students, teachers and parents in different parts of the island about the desperate conditions they now face.

Sashidevi, a 42-year-old widow lives in the Hanthana Tea Estate, a small state-owned enterprise in Kandy. Many of the estate’s workers must seek additional outside employment to deal with the rising cost of living. She told the TSPAC that she could no longer afford the 30,000 rupees (\$93) needed for the monthly cost of education for her five children.

“We do not have proper homes—there are no toilets—and we’ve reduced our three meals a day to just one. A large (CR) exercise book costs 450–500 rupees and a pair of shoes costs 4,000 rupees. There’s not enough work in the plantation and so I go to town looking for domestic work. How can we educate our children when we don’t even have the means to sustain our lives?”

A teacher from Bandarawela Punagala Sinhala College said that paper for artwork is not provided by the government or the school, and that parents cannot afford to buy this material.

“Most of the children wear slippers to school. They do not even have the means to get their school uniforms sewn. The number of students dropping out has increased for these reasons. Last year there were 14 students in my class. This has now fallen to 7 and the same situation prevails in the other grades too,” she added.

Biso Manike lives in Ambagahawella, a remote village near Ampara in the Eastern province. Many people in the village, including her husband, are involved in dry-land cultivation (chena cultivation), but have always had to borrow money to make ends meet.

“My son is now in grade 7 and it’s difficult to pay his expenses. His shoes are broken, and so he wears slippers to school. Private tuition fees have also increased now. I feel scared when I think about the future of the children,” she said. Manike explained that most families in the village face the same, or an even worse, situation.

A security officer, who works at a school in Puttalam, said that he had to pay 40,000 rupees for schoolbooks, school bags, and shoes for his three children for the first term which began in March.

“My eldest son is in grade 9 and the other two children are in primary school. Now an eraser even costs 30 rupees,” he explained. “I pawned my motorbike and got 30,000 rupees to buy exercise books for my three children this year.”

Rohana Priyantha, a resident of Moratuwa, also has three school-age children. Because higher-level examinations were delayed by almost a year, his oldest had to undertake a private course, which cost 600,000 rupees. Priyantha had to borrow this money from the private construction company where he works. His monthly salary is only 60,000 rupees and so he is struggling to pay all the tuition fees of his children.

An Advanced Level Examination student from a National School in Putlam explained how inflation and other increasing economic problems are impacting on his education.

He said: “We’re still unable to continuously engage in our studies. Last year I spent 40 rupees a day on bus fares, now it costs about 120 rupees, the cost of a lunch packet has tripled, and tuition fees have increased. My mother, who works as a domestic aide for 1,000 rupees a day, is unable to afford these expenses. Many students in my class are not coming to school because of these problems.”

His brother was able to obtain a loan and is studying at a private university but is also working at a poultry farm to earn an income. “One person we know gives us some food each month, otherwise we would go hungry.”

According to a 2019 survey, an average family in Sri Lanka spent around 32 percent of their monthly income on food. In 2023, two in five households are spending about 75 percent of their income on food.

In June, a survey by LIRNEasia, a Colombo based think tank, revealed that 6 percent of children between the ages of 5 and 18 are not attending school because of poverty and 47 percent of Sri Lankan families have reduced their food intake.

These damning figures, however, are ignored by Education Minister Susil Premajayantha. He threateningly told a recent public meeting that teachers were responsible for the rising number of school dropouts.

“Children’s confidence in school has been shattered and they are going to private tuition when the exams are near,” Premajayantha said. He denounced the teachers for holding a one-day strike against the government’s anti-democratic decision to abolish teacher transfer boards. “What you are doing is striking even for other people’s issues,” he said.

Contrary to Premajayantha’s claims, the rising number of children dropping out of school is the direct responsibility of the government and the Sri Lankan capitalist class, which have created the conditions where tens of thousands of parents are not even able to properly feed their children.

This situation is worsening as the Wickremesinghe regime deepens its austerity measures, job destruction, privatisation, wage and pension cuts and hikes to the cost of all essentials. Free public health and education are particular targets of the IMF’s austerity measures.

The government has significantly cut funding for teachers’ salaries, annual uniforms and even school textbooks. It no longer prints new textbooks, causing shortages and forcing children to use old textbooks. The school system is also plagued by shortages of teachers, who are among the lowest-paid public sector workers, and non-teaching staff.

Education expenditure, which still remains at just 1.5 percent of gross national product, has meant continuous cuts to the island’s limited free public education services and the growth of private schools and universities.

These attacks are part of a global assault of public education. Billions of dollars are poured into bailing out the banks and big business and to funding the US-led NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, at the expense of public education spending worldwide.

The fight to defend free education as a basic social right is directly bound up with the mobilisation of the working class in an independent political and industrial struggle against the Wickremesinghe government and for a government of workers’ and peasants’ government committed to socialist policies.



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