Protesting Sri Lankan teachers defy police water cannon and tear gas

W.A. Sunil
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On Tuesday, more than 4,000 Sri Lankan teachers protested in front of the Education Ministry in Colombo to demand increased pay and allowances, increased government funding and no collecting of funds from parents for school maintenance. The protest reflects the growing anger in the working class against the government's austerity policies.

The teachers marched half a kilometre from Buddhadasa Stadium to the Education Ministry at Palawatte displaying placards with their demands. They also chanted slogans including "stop state repression!" and "withdraw Online Safety Bill and Anti-Terrorism Bill!"

The government had deployed hundreds of riot police and armed soldiers to intimidate and suppress the protest. Police attempted to stop the march, attacking teachers with water cannon, tear gas and batons. Several teachers were injured. The march continued, however, and teachers protested for over an hour outside the Education Ministry.

The police attack is part of growing state repression against workers, students and others. On October 18, the police charged a demonstration of Peradeniya University students protesting against the privatisation of higher education, repressive legislation and delays in scholarship payments.

The teachers' protest was called by the Teachers' and Principals' Trade Union Alliance (TPTUA)—a collective of more than 20 teachers' unions, including the Ceylon Teachers Union (CTU), Ceylon Teachers' Services Union (CTSU) controlled by the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), and United Teacher Services Union affiliated with the fake-left Frontline Socialist Party.

The aim of the TPTUA is not to mobilise teachers in a genuine fight for their rights but rather to dissipate their anger and militancy into futile appeals to President Ranil Wickremesinghe and his government. The proposed budget for next year is to be presented to parliament on November 13.

CTU General Secretary Joseph Stalin blustered: "The government has not allocated sufficient money for teachers from the budget. The government must be allocated money for that in the November budget. If not, we [TPTUA] will fight together."

CTSU General Secretary Mahinda Jayasinghe bragged: "Today we called out only 4,000. If the government does not allocate the necessary money for teachers in the budget we will commence a huge struggle on the following day."

Pressuring the government has already proven to be a political dead-end. The TPTUA called an online education strike in July 2021 amid the deadly COVID-19 pandemic calling for increased pay. Across the country 250,000 teachers defied government threats and joined the strike which lasted for 100 days.

The outcome was a pitiful rise in pay amid soaring inflation. The demands included a 31,000-rupee monthly increase for grade one teachers, 11,000 rupees for grade three new recruits, and increases for other grades. The government granted less than half: 11,820 rupees for grade one teachers, 3,750 rupees for new recruits and small amounts for other grades. Principals also received less than half of what they had demanded.

The TPTUA agreed to the government proposals reporting it to be a "victory". Over the past 26 years, successive Sri Lankan governments have rejected teachers' wage demands which the trade unions have simply accepted. As a result, teachers are among the lowest-paid public sector workers in Sri Lanka.

Inflation is now further cutting into the real wages of the working class, including teachers. According to the

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official statistics, taking the base year of 2013 as 100, real wages of public sector and private sector employees had declined to 58 and 82 points respectively by mid-2023. The government claims that inflation fell to 0.8 percent in September, but workers face continued price increases for essentials including fuel, electricity and water.

Teachers told the WSWS that the small wage increases two years ago had been reduced to nothing.

A grade one teacher said that his salary was 64,000 rupees. “After deducting 14,000 rupees for the housing loan I get only 50,000 rupees. When we got the salary increase in 2021, I had to spend only 40 rupees for the bus fare to school and petrol was 119 rupees per litre. Now the prices of both have trebled. I have two children who are studying for the advance level exam. Several thousands have to be spent for their tuition and other expenses. We have to fight for our rights. That is why I came here.”

A grade two teacher said that his salary was 55,000 rupees. “After deductions, my take home pay is only about 30,000 rupees. I have to spend 20,000 rupees per month on a bank loan. So, I am running a small business on Saturdays and Sundays to cope with the family’s expenses. I can’t save a cent.”

Teachers should reject the myth promoted by the trade unions that the government can be pressured to grant proper pay and conditions. The attack on teachers’ rights is part of the onslaught on the working class as a whole being carried out on the orders of the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The IMF’s conditions for its $US3 billion bailout loan include broader and higher taxes, severe cuts to public expenditure, the restructuring of hundreds of state-owned enterprises, drastic reductions in the public sector workforce and increased electricity and water tariffs.

Education and public health services are on the chopping block. The government is promoting private schools and universities at the expense of public education. Foreign investors separately or as joint-ventures with local businesses have already established hundreds of private schools and several campuses.

Annual budget expenditure for general and university education for the current year is 2 percent of the GDP and has hovered around that number for years. Schools and universities are decaying. According to the trade unions, schools are short of staff by more than 40,000 teachers, mainly for major subjects including mathematics, science and English.

It is sheer fantasy to imagine that the Wickremesinghe government, or indeed any of the opposition parties, will even consider the TPTUA demand to increase the education budget to 6 percent of GDP. The police attack on protesting teachers makes clear that the government will respond with police state measures to the mounting opposition in the working class.

To fight for decent wages, defend and improve public education and overturn the raft of repressive laws being legislated by the Wickremesinghe regime requires nothing less than a political fight against the crisis-ridden capitalist system.

Teachers need to unite with other sections of workers and take the fight into their own hands. For that, workers have to organise a network of their own democratically-elected action committees, including schools, factories, plantations and neighbourhoods, and among rural peasants, completely independent of the trade unions and all bourgeois parties.

Educators are in the forefront of struggles in the US, UK and other European countries to defend education, jobs and wages. It is necessary to unite the international working class in this struggle against capitalism.

This involves a fight against the Wickremesinghe regime’s government and for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies, including the nationalisation of the banks, major corporations and large plantations under the democratic control of the working class and the repudiation of all foreign debts.

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