

Thousands of university employees in Sri Lanka demonstrate to demand wage rise

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On Tuesday over 3,000 non-academic workers from all universities across Sri Lanka demonstrated outside the finance ministry in Colombo to demand a 15 percent pay hike and a 25 percent increase in their monthly compensation allowance (MCA).

The workers, who have been on strike since May 2, protested in defiance of an appeal by University Grants Commission (UGC) chairman Sampath Amaratunge that they return to work.

Sri Lankan President and Finance Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, who has categorically refused to grant a pay rise to university employees or any other state worker, mobilised over 1,000 armed police and navy soldiers to intimidate the demonstrators.

Wearing gas masks and holding rifles and tear-gas equipment, police surrounded the protesters, with several water-cannon vehicles on standby. Workers who passed by those vehicles reported eye pain, indicating that the police had toxic chemicals ready to use in a water cannon attack. An additional battalion of anti-riot police was mobilised to the area as the demonstration grew.

Refusing to be intimidated, the strikers continued their demonstration for about 90 minutes, holding placards that read: “Fill the university vacancies; Resolve salary anomaly issues; Increase the MCA allowances immediately; Ensure the right to education of our children, and Remove the UGC chairman.”

While the government insists that there will be no salary increase, the University Trade Union Joint Committee (UTUJC) leadership is backing away from its original demands. Several UTUJC officials met with finance ministry officials during the demonstration.

Dhammika S. Priyantha, co-chairmen of the UTUJC, later said: “According to the information we received, the main obstacle [in solving our demands] is the UGC chairman. We will continue our struggle to oust him from his position.”

This was repeated by Chanaka Rodrigo, speaking on behalf of the university administration employees organisation, who said that State Minister of Education

Suren Raghavan had told them that the UGC chairman was unwilling to grant their demands.

To claim that UGC chairman Amaratunge is the main culprit and must resign—a call echoed by the rest of the union leadership, including those from the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna and Sri Lanka Freedom Party—is a diversionary cover for Wickremesinghe.

While Amaratunge, who was appointed by the Sri Lankan president, adamantly refuses to grant the limited demands of the trade unions, he is simply following the IMF-dictated austerity attacks of Wickremesinghe and his government.

This further underlines the fact that striking university employees and the working class as a whole are in a political struggle against the government. The only way they can increase their wages, and defend jobs and working conditions is in a unified struggle by the working class against the government and for socialist policies.

Two days before the demonstration, Priyantha told the *Sunday Morning* something about the trade union leadership’s discussions with State Minister for Education Suren Raghavan.

“[G]iven the lack of funds [for the government] at present, we reached an agreement [with regard to the MCA] for 12 percent to be provided from this June and for the remaining 13 percent from next January,” Priyantha said. In other words, the leadership has dropped strikers’ demands for an immediate 25 percent increase.

He also admitted that the union collective leadership had endorsed Raghavan’s claims that a 15 percent salary increase would cost the government 5 billion rupees and that it could not grant this demand.

“We agreed to this as well and would do it next year after appointing a separate committee... As trade unions we have demonstrated maximum flexibility towards the government,” Priyantha said.

Neither Priyantha nor any other union leader had

previously revealed this climb-down to their members, or that they are now discussing a 12 percent MCA increase, which has also been rejected. While the trade union leadership on Tuesday called demonstrators to continue the strike, they are actively watering down workers' demands behind the scenes.

As Socialist Equality Party (SEP) Political Committee member W.A. Sunil told an SEP meeting on June 14: "There are no solutions to workers' demands in the crisis-ridden capitalist system. The financial meltdown in Sri Lanka is part of a world economic crisis and it is this crisis that is driving workers into struggle in other countries, including the major capitalist countries, to defend their wages, jobs and living conditions.

"Workers must also reject the propaganda promoted by the trade unions and the opposition capitalist parties that their problems will be resolved after the scheduled elections.

"Any capitalist government that comes to power in these elections will not solve the problems of the masses but will implement IMF austerity and brutally suppress workers' struggles. All the capitalist parties in Sri Lanka are committed to the IMF measures. What is needed is not a capitalist regime but a workers' and farmers' government."

Sunil urged striking non-academic workers to take their struggle into their own hands by forming workers' action committees in every workplace and explained the need to fight for socialist policies.

On Tuesday several demonstrating strikers voiced their opposition to the government and criticised the trade union bureaucracy.

Anuruddha from Peradeniya University said police were already prepared to crackdown on Tuesday's protest even before demonstrators began to arrive at the finance ministry.

It was clear, he said, that the government's policies were against the workers. Its refusal to grant even minimum demands had forced workers to take to the streets. Any suggestion that workers could pressure the government was wrong, he said.

"How can we believe that the government can resolve these issues in the next budget?" he asked, and added, "We can't go back to work without winning our demands. If we report to work after being defeated, our leave will be cut, and we will not have any pay. We are being patient and have not received any wages for the past two months."

Anuruddha warned that if the strike was defeated workers would still confront high workloads because there were not enough non-academic staff at the universities. Instead of filling vacant positions, he said, university authorities are recruiting new workers on a contract basis.

"We kept working when university teachers were on strike, but they also have wage problems and other issues.

Citing our strike, management has stopped new student admissions. We should organise a common fight involving all of us."

A worker from the Visual and Performing Arts University said: "I learnt that yesterday's discussion was fruitless. Most of the non-academic workers live on loans and several others I know have begun to do odd jobs to survive.

"I agree with your suggestion that all the workers should be united. Telecom, Electricity, Health and Water Board workers should launch a united struggle to defend their living conditions, but the trade unions do not have this sort of program.

"I've received news that the union leaders are quarreling with each other over how to end the strike, so I have no idea where the unions are going. In the coming days they'll probably ask us to report back to work," he said.

A striking worker from Sri Jayawardenepura University said that workers came from universities all across the island, including from Jaffna in the North, to protest on Tuesday.

"When we arrived early at the UGC protest there were more police than workers. About 45 police vehicles were there," he said. He explained that university authorities had prepared in advance to suppress their struggle and then referred to the government's suspension of 62 Ceylon Electricity Board workers, who had campaigned against the privatisation of the institution.

"Non-academic workers, however, cannot carry on this strike if they remain isolated. The situation is becoming difficult and strikers are already discussing on social media platforms how to pay their bank loans. I'm interested in finding a new program," he said.



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