

Sri Lankan university non-academic trade unions betray 75-day strike

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On Monday, the University Non-Academic Trade Union Alliance (UNATUA) accepted a series of vague government promises and ended a 75-day pay strike by its members without winning any of their demands. About 13,000 non-academic workers at all of the country's 17 state universities began their struggle on May 2 to demand a 15 percent pay hike through the rectification of longstanding salary anomalies, and for a 25 percent increase in the monthly compensation allowance (MCA).

The UNATUA bureaucracy's decision is a gross betrayal of its members whose determined strike defied police repression and the Wickremesinghe government's outright rejection of their demands, and a vicious media campaign accusing workers of "sabotaging students' future."

Attempting to justify its betrayal, UNATUA co-chairman Dhammika S. Priyantha told the media that the strike shutdown was only "temporary." He claimed the union leadership had been able to reach an agreement with the University Grant Commission chairman Sampath Amaratunge after discussions with Education Minister Susil Premajayantha.

Priyantha said these officials had promised to "correct" salary anomalies by January next year via an "expert committee" previously suggested by President Wickremesinghe, and that work towards an MCA increase would begin "soon."

Previous Sri Lankan governments have made similar flimsy promises since the non-academic trade unions first raised their demands in 2016. On each occasion, the union bureaucracy has presented these promises as "a victory" and called off all action.

Wickremesinghe insisted from the outset that the treasury did not have enough revenue and that his government would not allocate any funds in this year's budget for public sector wage increases. "Do you want me to increase VAT [value added tax] by 3 to 4 percent to give you a salary increase?" he exclaimed.

Confronted with growing calls for pay rises by public sector workers, Wickremesinghe said he would appoint an

"expert committee" headed by Udaya Nanayakkara to examine their demands. The committee proposal—a crude political manoeuvre by the government—provided the trade union leadership with an excuse to derail workers' demands for industrial action.

Priyantha presented the union's betrayal of the strike as a victory, praising the UGC chairman for promising not to cut the pay of the non-academic staff or reduce loan instalment payments during the 75-day strike. It has yet to be seen whether the government, which was desperate to stop the industrial action lest it encourage others to strike, will keep this promise.

The UNATUA bureaucracy did not consult with members prior to ending all industrial action and then suddenly called meetings at the universities to announce the leaders' decision. Members were simply presented with a fait accompli, with no discussion allowed or votes taken at these meetings.

This blatant violation of members' rights was replicated at a meeting of about 400 workers convened by the University Trade Union Collective, which is affiliated to UNATUA, at Moratuwa University on Monday.

Gayan Peiris, president of the Moratuwa University union collective, claimed pay rise strikes by public sector employees had undermined the non-academic workers. In a crude attempt to pit university workers against their class brothers and sisters in other sectors, Peiris declared, "The government thinks that if demands are given to one section, then it will have to give the same to other sections... We were at a disadvantage" because of this situation, he said.

Peiris also falsely claimed that workers could not take any industrial action, if Sri Lanka's election commission announced the date for the forthcoming presidential elections, scheduled sometime in September or November. It was therefore a "tactical decision" to end the non-academic workers' strike, he said.

Attempting to justify the betrayal, Asoka Chandana from the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-controlled Inter University Workers Union branch at Moratuwa University,

declared: “It is a victory that we began the action together and ended it together... We fought not just for the sake of money.”

Dehin Wasantha, a technical worker at the Moratuwa University and a leading Socialist Equality Party (SEP) member, briefly addressed the meeting, challenging the union bureaucracy and its bankrupt program. The trade union leadership attempted to stop him speaking but when this failed, they started shouting and making noise so that he could not be heard.

Wasantha hailed the determined struggle waged by his striking colleagues, saying: “The SEP and I insisted from the beginning of the struggle that it was impossible for non-academic workers to win our demands simply by pressuring the government. That has now been clearly proven.

“You must give serious attention to the critical political issues posed before us in this struggle. The trade union leaders unwillingly called this strike. Their letter to the education minister admitted, ‘We were compelled to call the strike because of pressure from members.’

“The rejection of our pay demands and other attacks on the working class are a part of the IMF [International Monetary Fund] program being implemented by the Wickremesinghe government. Workers must be mobilised in a united struggle against the government and its austerity program.

“This struggle cannot be carried out under the trade unions. It is necessary to build action committees, independent of the union leadership to organise such a struggle. Study the program presented by the SEP and the WSWs,” Wasantha said.

The non-academic university workers determined 75-day strike action again demonstrated that the working class can only defend jobs, wages and social conditions in a political struggle against the Wickremesinghe government and its IMF-dictated austerity attacks.

Following IMF orders, Colombo is now increasing government revenue by squeezing workers and the poor to repay foreign debts and boost investments and the profit system.

Instead of fighting these social attacks, all sections of the trade union bureaucracy, including the UNATUA, have deliberately divided workers, pitting one sector against another, calling separate, scattered actions and falsely claiming that the government can be pressured to change course.

Claims by the trade union bureaucracy that workers cannot strike or fight for their rights during the elections are a patent lie. This canard is promoted by the parliamentary opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and their respective trade unions. These pro-capitalist parties and unions have no fundamental differences

with the IMF and if elected would implement its austerity measures with the same ruthlessness as Wickremesinghe and his government.

The SEP intervened in the non-academic workers strike systematically proposing an alternative program to carry forward their struggle. It published numerous articles in English, Sinhala and Tamil on the *World Socialist Web Site*, and held an online public meeting on June 14 to develop discussion on its perspective.

As SEP member Dehin Wasantha explained at the Moratuwa University meeting, university non-academic staff must review the political lessons of their 75-day struggle. Above all, workers cannot go forward if their struggle remains in the hands of pro-capitalist trade union bureaucracies.

Democratic discussion on their demands and what industrial and political actions are needed to win is impossible inside the existing trade union structures. Workers who try to discuss or criticise the existing trade union leadership and their programs are blocked and silenced, including with threats of physical violence.

We urge workers to take matters into their own hands by forming democratically controlled action committees, independent of the trade union apparatuses.

Such bodies can coordinate with committees in other workplaces, plantations and in working-class neighbourhoods to develop the ways and means for a common struggle against the government and its escalating social attacks. They will also reach out to international class brothers and sisters now coming into struggles against jobs and wage cuts and the suppression of basic democratic rights.

None of these demands can be won without a political fight against the Wickremesinghe regime and its IMF measures and for a workers’ and peasants’ government which will implement socialist policies.

We appeal to non-academic university to contact the SEP, which will assist you and other workers to form action committees and take forward the struggle.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)