

Sri Lanka: Workers action committee discusses defence of school development officers

Our correspondents
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About 60 people attended an online meeting on December 15 organised by the Workers' Action Committee Collective (CWAC) in Sri Lanka. The event was to discuss the struggle of School Development Officers (SDOs) for integration into the teaching service and how to fight the ongoing police persecution, initiated by the Dissanayake government, of SDO activists.

Those participating in the meeting, which was broadcast on the Socialist Equality Party's Facebook page, included SDOs and other workers, as well as SEP members. The broadcast reached over 3,600 live viewers and had been shared 215 times by the time of writing.

On December 2, nearly 1,000 SDOs demonstrated outside the Education Ministry in Battaramulla, Colombo to demand their integration into the teaching service. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna-led (JVP)-led government responded by mobilising hundreds of police officers to suppress the protest. Four SDOs were arrested and held on remand for eight days before being released on strict bail conditions.

The online meeting was part of an intense campaign, particularly focused on social media, to raise awareness about these issues and to defend these workers.

Kapila Fernando, convener of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), a member of the SEP Political Committee and a teacher, chaired the event. He explained that the main demand of the SDOs—integration into the teaching service—is entirely legitimate.

Many SDOs have been teaching for over four years, often involved in subject-related activities, and work long hours, until 3:30 p.m., compared to the 1:30 p.m. finish for regular teachers. Despite this, they are only paid a monthly salary, which is 6,500 rupees (\$US22) less than for regular teachers.

Fernando criticised the SDO union leadership for limiting its members to futile protests, which it falsely claims would pressure the government to grant their demands.

Mahinda Jayasinghe, who heads the JVP-controlled Ceylon Teachers' Service Union and is now Sri Lanka's deputy minister of labour, has publicly opposed the SDOs' demands, insisting that teacher recruitment should be based on competitive exams and restricted to those under 35 years of age.

Fernando told the meeting that the JVP/NPP government attacks on the SDOs were in line with Colombo's total commitment to the

International Monetary Fund's (IMF) austerity measures and the escalating social assaults on workers by capitalist governments globally.

He quoted a CWAC statement issued on December 7: "The four teachers arrested are the first victims of the class war being waged by President Dissanayake's government. The working class cannot allow such attacks to continue. An attack on one section of our class is an attack on us all."

In his report, SEP Political Committee member Pani Wijesiriwardena said the 16,000 SDOs have been performing teaching duties for four years and have a completely valid claim. "As workers, SDOs have the right to strike, protest, and demonstrate for their demands. It was this basic democratic right that they attempted to exercise on December 2," he said.

The government responded, however, by deploying police to break up the protest. Four SDOs were taken to the Kaduwela Magistrate's Court, where they were remanded in custody. If convicted on charges which include unlawful assembly and injuring three police officers, they could face up to three years in prison and fines.

Wijesiriwardena told the meeting that three additional SDOs were arrested recently, one of whom was remanded while the other two were released on bail. The government's response to the protest foreshadows further attacks on workers by the Dissanayake government, he warned.

"As the SEP and CWAC have explained, we urge workers and the toiling masses to recognise this attack on SDOs as an attack on the working class as a whole," Wijesiriwardena continued. He also pointed out that while the JVP/NPP made numerous promises during the general election campaign—including that it would repeal the Prevention of Terrorism Act—it has instead used this law against workers and political opponents.

"This government is anti-worker and pro-imperialist. It uses brutal methods to enable the witch hunt of workers, as evidenced by a state intelligence officer being sent as a provocateur to the December 2 protest," Wijesiriwardena said.

The speaker said SDOs, and the rest of the working class, had to vigorously denounce these government's anti-democratic actions, issue statements and organise protests at their workplaces and demand the dropping of all charges.

Wijesiriwardena said workers must reject the constant mantra of

the media and the unions of “giving time to the government.” He pointed out that many of those who became SDOs had waited years without stable employment before being recruited under former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse’s government, often on an ad-hoc basis and for meagre wages. These jobs, while better than nothing, he continued, do not provide a living wage.

Every time workers protest privatisation or demand higher wages, Colombo governments have resorted to brutal police and military tactics. The current government is no exception.

Following the IMF’s demands, the Dissanayake administration is moving to privatise, commercialise, and restructure over 400 state-owned enterprises (SOEs), putting hundreds of thousands of jobs at risk. Duminda Hulangamuwa, an economic adviser to President Dissanayake, recently stated that 550,000 public sector jobs should be eliminated immediately.

Claims that it is possible to pressure the government to change course are a political dead end, Wijesiriwardena said. The root cause lies in the capitalist system, which prioritises profit over human needs.

Workers must build their own action committees and launch a united struggle based on a socialist perspective, against the government and the profit system, he continued.

This means the large corporations, banks, and plantations should be nationalised under the democratic control of the working class. Production should be restructured to meet social need, not profit. To ensure decent wages for workers, the vast wealth in the hands of a few capitalists must be seized and redirected into large public projects that generate jobs, Wijesiriwardena said.

The biggest obstacles to this program, he continued, are the trade unions and fake-left organisations, such as the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), which are tied to capitalism. These bodies act as safety valves for the system and support the capitalist status quo.

The SEP, on the other hand, campaigns for an independent political movement of the working class and the building of a mass revolutionary party rooted in the working class on a socialist program and rallying of the poor peasantry.

Action committees should be established in every workplace, factory, and neighbourhood in the rural communities, independent of bourgeois political parties and pro-capitalist trade unions. These committees should elect delegates to convene a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses to discuss an international socialist program.

This includes the following demands: No to IMF-dictated austerity, No to privatisation and restructuring, all SOEs placed under the democratic control of workers and the repudiation of all foreign loans.

This struggle is not confined to Sri Lanka. Workers around the world must unite against internationally organised capital, and the alternative must be international socialism. The International Committee of the Fourth International has already initiated the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to take this forward, the speaker concluded.

During the Question-and-Answer session, one audience member asked how SDOs should organise their fight under conditions where the union leadership is directing workers towards an appeal against the witch hunt in the courts.

Wijesiriwardena explained that the origin of the issues facing SDOs was inseparable from the crisis of the capitalist system, and that no government, regardless of its promises, could grant their demands. The trade unions, he said, serve as the enforcers of the capitalist order, often pushing workers to seek justice through courts that serve the ruling class.

He explained how the bourgeois courts, despite their claims to be impartial, uphold interests of the ruling class. When the class struggle intensifies the bourgeois class character of courts is more openly revealed.

“We may go to the courts to reveal and thwart unlawful acts by employers, but not as an end itself. Our main focus is on the building of an independent political movement of the working class to fight for its social and democratic rights,” Wijesiriwardena said.

The trade union leaders, by contrast, insist that workers can win justice in these courts. They oppose the independent mobilisation of the working class to win their rights, seeking to trap workers within the capitalist framework.

Adding to the discussion SEP Assistant Secretary Saman Gunadasa referred to the Wickremesinghe government’s closure of the Cooperative Wholesale Establishment (CWE) in 2023 and the retrenchment of all its workers. The CWE union leadership opposed turning to the working class to fight this attack and filed a lawsuit, insisting that workers could win justice in the courts. The judiciary ruled, however, that it will not intervene against the government’s policies because the Sri Lankan economy was in a deep crisis.

Another audience member wanted to know the difference between the SEP’s call for mass revolutionary party and the FSP’s People’s Struggle Alliance (PSA).

Wijesiriwardena said that the SEP is based on the working class and fights to build a mass revolutionary party to overthrow capitalism and for the establishment of a workers’ and peasants’ government as part of struggle for socialism internationally.

The PSA, he said, is not rooted in the working class but is a front formed by the FSP, with the support of other middle-class groups, and which operates to politically subordinate workers to the capitalist parties.

The SEP’s program of organising workers to fight for their class independence is fundamentally opposed to the PSA’s nationalist program of class collaboration. Currently, the PSA supports the right-wing JVP/NPP government falsely claiming it represents the “expectation of masses.”

Wijesiriwardena said the FSP has not written anything about, let alone condemned, the government’s witch hunt against the SDOs. He also pointed out that the FSP-controlled United Teachers Service Union has lined up with other teachers’ unions in opposing the SDOs legitimate demands.



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