

Sri Lankan educators protest low pay and impossible working conditions

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7 August 2026

Around 200 government schoolteachers protested on August 4 in front of the Ministry of Education building in Colombo, demanding an end to delays in promotions and salary increments, and payment of the outstanding two-thirds of promised pay increases.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) promised during its election campaigns to meet these demands. After winning the elections in 2024, it abandoned its promises and intensified the attacks on workers and poor.

Tuesday's protest was the first action organised by the Teachers' and Principals' Trade Union Alliance (TPTUA) since the JVP/NPP came to power. There is mounting pressure from teachers to fight the government's attacks on their wages and working conditions, but the unions have refused to mobilise them and deliberately sought to limit the size of the protest.

Public sector teachers number around 240,000, but only a minority are union members, reflecting widespread distrust of the bureaucracy.

Over the past two years, union leaders have repeatedly made empty threats to call industrial action, only to withdraw them, claiming that the government "promised" to address issues facing teachers. This has suppressed opposition while the government implemented the austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

After an hour-long demonstration, several union leaders entered the ministry building to try and meet Harini Amarasuriya, who is both education minister and prime minister. As she was not there, they met with the ministry's secretary and other officials.

Returning from the discussion, Ceylon Teachers Union (CTU) general secretary, Joseph Stalin addressed protesters. Seeking to absolve the government of responsibility, he blamed ministry officials for failing to submit teachers' demands to the Public Service Salaries

Commission (PSSC). Stalin said he had asked officials to submit the teachers' demands ahead of a meeting with the PSSC scheduled for August 11.

The CTU leader declared that there was no obstacle to meeting teachers' demands in this year's budget. He added the ministry had a duty to make this request, declaring: "Shame on the government and the ministry."

Stalin also shouted: "You [the government] can't fool teachers all the time. If there is no money, that is a separate matter."

This remark, which Stalin did not elaborate on, echoes the government's cynical claims that it has no money to increase salaries for public sector employees. Meanwhile, the government has increased the prices of essentials and imposed taxes on working people as it seeks to repay foreign debt and provide concessions to big businesses.

The last major industrial action called by the TPTUA, a coalition of more than 20 unions, including the CTU and the JVP-controlled Ceylon Teacher Services Union (CTSU), was the nationwide sick-leave strike on June 26–27, 2024, just three months before the JVP/NPP came to power.

Approximately 250,000 teachers, principals, and instructors participated nationwide. On June 26, around 10,000 gathered in Colombo, where President Ranil Wickremesinghe's government responded by deploying police, who attacked with water cannon, tear gas and batons, injuring dozens of teachers. As with the recent protest, the main demands in 2024 were payment of a long-overdue salary increase—the remaining two-thirds of the wage rise promised after the unions betrayed a 100-day strike in 2021, which the government never delivered—and promotions in the Teacher and Principal Services.

At Tuesday's protest, the unions completely dropped two demands raised in 2024: for an end to the privatisation of education and to the IMF's austerity

measures. The union bureaucracy is colluding with the JVP/NPP government in imposing these attacks.

During the 2024 protests, the leader of the JVP-controlled CTSU, Mahinda Jayasinghe, falsely promised that “these problems will be solved by building a popular government.” Two years into the government, Jayasinghe, who helped channel teachers’ anger against the Wickremesinghe regime into electoral support for the JVP, was rewarded with the post of deputy minister of labour.

Stalin also fully backed the JVP/NPP government and has defended its attacks on educators. On December 2, 2024, soon after the government took office, around 1,000 School Development Officers—who are paid less than teachers but perform the same tasks—staged a peaceful protest demanding their absorption into the Teaching Service. The government deployed the police to brutally disperse the protest and arrest several participants. Stalin publicly opposed the development officers’ demand, claiming that it violated the Teachers’ Service Statue Rules.

The unions are finding it increasingly difficult to suppress teachers’ struggles amid the rising cost of living and harsh working conditions. According to data from the Central Bank of Sri Lanka and the World Bank, real wages for public sector workers have eroded by more than 33 percent because of soaring inflation since 2022.

Under the IMF’s austerity program, the working class is being hit with increased taxes on dozens of essential commodities, cuts to spending on education and health, and restrictions on recruitment to the public service, including teachers. Schools with fewer than 50 students have been closed and classes in urban schools are overcrowded. School maintenance costs are being shifted onto teachers and parents.

At Tuesday’s protest, a music teacher from a popular Colombo school with more than 3,000 students, described his difficulties as follows:

“At present, I am the only music teacher. There are vacancies for about three more teachers. I have to teach from Grade 6 to Grade 13. Students from two grades come at the same time. So, although I am supposed to teach 40 periods a week, I teach 52. I have around 450 answer scripts to mark for the term examination. There is no end to the work.

“We organized a variety show to raise money to purchase a bus for the school. We have to organize music competitions and do all these other things as well.”

Teacher shortages in mathematics, science, English and

the arts have now increased enormously. The teacher-student ratio in urban schools has risen to as high as 1:50. Hundreds of schools with smaller numbers of students are effectively being forced to close due to the failure to provide teachers and resources. In the past two years, many of these schools have not enrolled a single child in Year 1.

All the unions are consciously working to restrict and contain workers’ opposition and allow the JVP/NPP government to implement the IMF’s austerity measures without disruption.

The CTSU, the JVP-affiliated teachers’ union, did not participate in Tuesday’s protest. The United Teachers’ Services Union (UTSU), affiliated with the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) and representing the Teachers’ and Principals’ Trade Union Alliance, also did not participate. The UTSU issued a statement saying that the protest was “good, but we must stop cuddling up to the government and really take to the streets.” Despite this militant posturing, the UTSU has not announced any action.

The low wages and harsh working conditions facing teachers are part of the broader assault on the entire system of free education. Teachers can only oppose these attacks by fighting for an independent political movement of the working class against the capitalist system and for the socialist reorganization of society. To carry out a real struggle, teachers must build their own fighting organisations—action committees, independent of the trade union bureaucracy and pseudo-left parties that are tied by a thousand threads to the capitalist state.



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