Thousands of development officers protest across Sri Lanka

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Thousands of development officers across Sri Lanka took part in a lunch-hour protest on August 31 over long-delayed salary increases and other grievances. They demanded the immediate release of a Cabinet paper the government has repeatedly said was prepared to address their concerns.

The Development Officers Trade Union Alliance (DOTUA) called the protests in an effort to contain the growing anger among development officers, who number approximately 150,000 and are employed in various state institutions, including public schools. Recruited over the past three decades from pools of unemployed graduates, they remain trapped in low-paid positions with no formal promotion system or clearly defined duties.

The DOTUA, formed in March 2026 as a combination of 11 trade unions led by the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), is seeking to prevent a broad struggle against the brutal austerity measures being imposed by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government.

World Socialist Web Site (WSWS) reporters spoke with some workers who were in a group of about 70 protesting near the Chilaw Provincial Secretariat in Puttalam District. Many expressed anger at the government's neglect of their demands.

Asanga, an economic development officer in Chilaw, told the WSWS that his basic salary is just 54,000 rupees and his total monthly income is 68,000 rupees ($US207). Assigned to cover 380 households, he receives a mere 300-rupee monthly transport allowance, which is not enough for one litre of fuel. "Sometimes I borrow money to buy fuel for my bike," he said. "I have a small child. My wife is unemployed. It is difficult to live."

He recalled that before coming to power, the JVP/NPP promised public sector salary increases every six months based on the cost of living. The salary increase in the 2027 budget will be only 2,000 rupees, far below soaring inflation.

"The government did not fulfil any of its promises," Asanga said. "Many of our officials voted for this government. Chandana Suriyarachchi, the secretary of the Development Officers Service Union, is now a JVP parliamentarian and does not look into our problems."

A female economic development officer, in service since 2012, recounted working for a year on a 10,000-rupee allowance before receiving a salary of about 20,000 rupees. She now receives a wage of 68,000 rupees. She said, "My husband is not working due to illness. I earn some money from selling coconuts from my land plot and use it for our son's education. There is no other extra income."

Between 2022 and 2026, real wages for public and private sector employees fell by 24 percent and 14 percent, respectively. According to the Department of Census and Statistics, inflation in Colombo rose to 8.0 percent in August 2026 from 7.3 percent in July—the highest since June 2023—as food inflation climbed to an over three-year high of 8.5 percent from 6.3 percent in July.

The official poverty line also rose to 17,679 rupees in August from 17,592 rupees in June.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has directed that Sri Lanka maintain a primary surplus of 2.3 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in the 2027 budget, with primary public expenditure capped at 13 percent. Austerity measures include expanding indirect taxes, removing fuel and electricity subsidies, increasing tariffs, and restructuring and privatizing state-owned enterprises. Rising global oil prices and import costs, exacerbated by the US-Israeli war against Iran, have further burdened working people.

Despite these conditions, the JVP/NPP government has repeatedly rejected development officers' demands. DOTUA leader Dhammika Munasinghe, who is the FSP's joint secretary, stated that although the government claims the draft service charter was submitted to Cabinet in March, no discussions have occurred since December 2024 and many demands remain unanswered. He warned that if the government fails to address workers' demands within two weeks, the union alliance will escalate its protests.

The union apparatus is hostile to united and independent working-class action. It promotes illusions that demands can be won merely by appealing to the government.

At the Chilaw protest, DOTUA propaganda secretary Indika told the workers: "It has been two years since the JVP/NPP government came to power and it has broken the promises made before the elections."

Taken seriously, such a statement points to only one conclusion: that workers must break from this right-wing, capitalist government and direct their struggle against it. But Indika immediately drew the opposite conclusion, declaring that the campaign was "not an action against the government," merely a plea for "some justice."

The union leadership thus converts workers' anger into harmless pleas to those in power. The FSP is also serving as a prop for the JVP/NPP: it hailed President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's election as an "expression of people's expectations" and offered to "protect" his government.

The unions are covering up the fact that the government's refusal to address the development officers' demands is directly bound up with its commitment to the IMF-dictated austerity agenda. DOTUA and other public sector unions have prevented state workers from launching a real struggle against this program.

The trade unions and the FSP played a major role in dissipating the 2022 mass uprising that compelled then-president Gotabhaya Rajapaksa to flee Sri Lanka. Working alongside the JVP and the entire political establishment, the unions ensured that the movement was wound down and the pro-imperialist Ranil Wickremesinghe was brought to power.

Having blocked any struggle against Wickremasinghe's ongoing austerity measures, the unions then paved the way for the JVP/NPP to assume power in 2024. The JVP/NPP's election promises to renegotiate the IMF's austerity demands, and to protect the interests of workers and the poor, have been exposed as a fraud.

The development officers' protests are part of a growing wave of working class struggles. On Wednesday, thousands of university teachers staged protests at campuses across the country, demanding higher salaries and improved facilities. More than 1,000 workers at the Sevanagala Sugar Factory have been on indefinite strike since August 25 demanding wage increases.

To prevent these struggles from being isolated and betrayed, and to expand and unify them, workers must organise independently and in opposition to the trade union bureaucracy and all the capitalist parties. Workers should form democratically elected action committees in every workplace, plantation, and working-class neighbourhood. These committees must fight to unite workers in all industries, as well as farmers, across communal and religious lines, against the IMF and the JVP/NPP government.

Workers in Sri Lanka face the same global assault on jobs, wages, and social services that confronts workers internationally. Workers' action committees should coordinate with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to build a powerful international struggle against war, austerity, and dictatorship.