Thousands of Sri Lankan university teachers strike over pay and conditions

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Teachers at all state universities in Sri Lanka, numbering around 7,000, held a one-day strike last Friday, expressing their deep anger over the crisis engulfing higher education. All academic activities across the state university system came to a standstill as almost all teachers participated in the strike.

Called by the Federation of University Teachers' Associations (FUTA), the action demanded solutions to the shortage of academic staff, crushing workloads, the lack of adequate physical and human resources, salary anomalies, cuts to allowances, and the heavy tax burden imposed on teachers' meagre incomes.

Nearly 2,000 teachers marched about half a kilometre from the University of the Visual and Performing Arts in central Colombo to the University Grants Commission (UGC), carrying placards demanding: "Six percent for education," "Defend free education" and "Save the state universities."

Marchers also carried a placard bearing the slogan, "A rich country—a poor education," a bitter parody of the 2024 election slogan of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government. Teachers from the University of Jaffna, Eastern University, Sabaragamuwa University and other universities outside Colombo travelled to join the protest.

Friday's action was the latest in a series of protests called by FUTA, which have intensified since early September. On September 9, academic staff at all state universities held a one-day protest strike.

The crisis engulfing the universities is the product of continuous cuts to public education imposed by successive Sri Lankan governments under the dictates of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). These cuts are now being intensified by the Dissanayake government.

Student enrolment has nearly doubled, rising from around 25,000 in 2012 to 45,000 today. According to FUTA, the state university system needs 12,000 academic staff members, but only 5,200 are currently employed—a shortfall of more than half. This has led to a sharp deterioration in the student-teacher ratio and a corresponding decline in the quality of education.

The exodus of academics is directly driven by government policy. Under Sri Lanka's tax regime, most university academics pay up to 36 percent of their income in taxes. At the same time, financial allocations for academic research have been drastically cut, depriving universities of the capacity to conduct serious academic research.

The university system is further strained by severe shortages of student hostels, laboratories and lecture halls, as well as inadequate library facilities. These conditions leave students and staff struggling to work in an environment that makes a mockery of claims that the country provides free public education.

Protesting teachers explained to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters some of the problems they face.

Lakmal Perera, a lecturer at the Open University of Sri Lanka in Colombo, described the problems confronting his university:

"Due to the austerity policies of both previous governments and the current one, the recruitment of new lecturers has been severely restricted. By the beginning of this year, there was a requirement to recruit 20 new members to our academic staff, but only three or four could be hired.

"We are burdened with an unmanageable workload, making it impossible to maintain the quality of our work. A large portion of our salaries is deducted in taxes, making it increasingly difficult to survive. What is unfolding in the universities is part of the IMF austerity measures."

A lecturer from Eastern University said that they had participated in previous protests called by the union. The lecturer explained the critical shortages in the academic workforce, particularly the severe lack of permanent, qualified staff, which has left many departments dependent on temporary lecturers.

"Students are confronted with overcrowded infrastructure, under-equipped science and language laboratories, and limited access to modern digital learning tools. These constraints are compounded by rigid, traditional curricula and broader regional problems, including insufficient government funding and the digital divide," the lecturer added.

At the end of the protest, FUTA leaders held a "seminar" outside the UGC and sought to portray the problems confronting universities as the product of the government's "lack of interest" or its "failure to understand the problems."

FUTA secretary Charudaththa Ilangasinghe went further,

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absolving the government of responsibility for the crisis and seeking to blame UGC officials. “There is a chairman, there is a vice chairman, but they are not worth five cents. We do not need a commission like this,” he declared.

This is a deliberate falsification. The government is refusing to meet the teachers’ demands, not because it lacks interest or understanding, but because its cuts to education expenditure is an essential component of its IMF austerity program.

Addressing the media, Ilangasinghe stated: “If solutions to these issues are not provided, we will intensify our actions, together with all those in this country who stand up for education.” He did not specify, however, what those actions would involve.

Ilangasinghe admitted that FUTA had held numerous discussions with the current government over the past two years, but that “all of them were futile.”

The futility of these discussions exposes the bankruptcy of FUTA’s pro-capitalist perspective. The teachers’ demands—including a 6 percent increase in public expenditure on education, an overhaul of university infrastructure, adequate academic staffing and proper facilities for students—cannot be met within the framework of the IMF program. No amount of protest action or strike activity will pressure the government to change course.

The JVP/NPP government began implementing its cost-cutting “education reforms” this year, with Dissanayake declaring that the country needed “labour market-oriented education.” Under the proposed system, students will be introduced to vocational training from Grade Six, with pathways to vocational university education upon reaching the Advanced Level.

As part of this initiative, Dissanayake announced that 50 new universities would be established in Sri Lanka by 2034, but without any expansion of the existing 17 state universities, which the government describes as traditional universities. As many teachers have warned, the JVP/NPP government is accelerating what it describes as the “natural death of universities” while moving towards total privatisation of education.

Around the world, capitalist governments and ruling elites have systematically abandoned the traditional mission of higher education, which historically emphasised the well-rounded intellectual, social and cultural development of students. In its place, they are imposing a model dictated by profit, austerity and militarism.

In 2012, FUTA led a 100-day strike—one of the longest industrial actions on the island in three decades—demanding a 20 percent wage increase and an increase in education expenditure to 6 percent of GDP. The union leadership betrayed the strike without securing a single demand, sending teachers back to work on the basis of empty government promises.

During the 2022 mass uprising that brought down the Rajapakse government and its austerity measures, FUTA’s leadership issued a statement declaring that Sri Lanka was “sunk in severe bankruptcy” and that, while IMF intervention was “regrettable,” it was nonetheless “unavoidable.”

FUTA threw its weight behind calls by the JVP and the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) for an interim government. Together with the trade unions and pseudo-left organisations, such as the Frontline Socialist Party, it channelled the mass uprising into a parliamentary dead end, paving the way for the election of the discredited, pro-US Ranil Wickremesinghe as president. Wickremesinghe subsequently signed the IMF bailout agreement.

Following Wickremesinghe’s signing of the IMF program, FUTA leaders were among several union officials who held discussions with IMF representatives, both virtually and in person.

Following a meeting with IMF officials in Colombo on November 22, 2024, a FUTA statement declared: “The IMF acknowledged our concerns and stressed the need to expand the tax net to balance the burden… We are optimistic that this dialogue has laid the groundwork for some relief in the future.” In other words, the FUTA leadership fully committed itself to the austerity policies of the Dissanayake government.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on university teachers to break from FUTA’s bankrupt, pro-capitalist perspective and fight for a socialist program that defends and advances fully funded, adequately staffed free public education at all levels. They must confront the fact that free education cannot be defended within the framework of capitalism.

We urge academics to establish their own rank-and-file action committees at every university, democratically elected by teachers and independent of the FUTA bureaucracy, to take the struggle out of the hands of union officials. These committees must open their doors to representatives of students and non-academic workers.

The struggle to defend education is inseparable from the broader struggle of the working class. Only by reorganising the economy to serve the needs of the majority, abolishing the profit system and repudiating foreign debt repayments can the necessary resources be released for the development of free education, health care and other essential social services.

We call on teachers to take up this struggle and attend the SEP-organised public meeting on November 10 at 4 p.m. at the Colombo Public Library Hall.

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