Thousands of non-academic workers in Sri Lankan universities strike over government's refusal to meet pay demands

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Tens of thousands of non-academic university workers across Sri Lanka held a one-day strike on November 18 to protest the government's refusal to address their wage and other demands in its 2027 budget.

Presented to parliament on November 12, the third austerity budget since the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) came to power contains massive IMF-dictated spending cuts and pro-business restructuring. It offers no substantial across-the-board wage increase to compensate public-sector employees for the continuing erosion of their purchasing power.

Workers, who had been misled by trade union bureaucrats into expecting the budget to provide immediate relief from their worsening conditions, quickly took action following its presentation.

The Association of Public Service Engineers launched a nationwide work stoppage on November 13. The Irrigation Technical Assistants Association began industrial action on November 16. On November 17, the All Ceylon Disaster Relief Services Association decided to withdraw its members from all disaster relief duties, while the Government Veterinary Officers' Association staged a stoppage with members collectively reporting sick. More protests by workers in other sectors are expected to follow.

On November 18, more than 1,000 non-academic workers from the universities of Moratuwa, Colombo, Sri Jayewardenepura and the Open University, all in the Colombo area, demonstrated outside the University Grants Commission. Similar actions, including picket lines, were reported at the Sabaragamuwa, Rajarata, Vavuniya, Eastern and South Eastern universities, paralysing the university system.

Protesters displayed placards and shouted slogans demanding: "Immediately increase the monthly compensation allowance," "Fill vacant non-academic staff positions," "Pay the slashed 20 percent allowance," "Ensure a fair pension for all," "Resolve salary anomalies" and "Protect workers' rights." The strike was called by the Joint Committee of University Trade Unions (JCUTU).

The JCUTU leaders, like the rest of the union bureaucracy, have repeatedly called limited protests over the past several years, including one shortly before the budget's presentation, claiming that such pressure would compel the government to meet workers' demands. The austerity budget has exposed the bankruptcy of these claims.

In July 2024, JCUTU leaders betrayed a courageous 75-day strike by non-academic workers across the universities, who were demanding a 15 percent wage increase and a 20 percent increase in the Monthly Compensation Allowance (MCA). The union promoted illusions in the promises made by an expert committee appointed by former president Ranil Wickremesinghe and later by the JVP/NPP government.

Despite none of these promises being fulfilled, the union leaders organised no protests for the next 18 months under the JVP/NPP government, which came to power in late 2024 backed by the unions. Their silence demonstrated their support for the government and its IMF-dictated program. Not a single trade union leader has raised opposition to the IMF program during the recent protests.

Despite the brutal austerity measures contained in the JVP/NPP's budgets for 2025 and 2026, the union bureaucracy suppressed any protests by workers until early 2026, when they called a token lunch-hour protest over cuts to allowances. The union appealed for the

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resumption of talks with the government, which had broken down in September 2025.

Meanwhile, the unions all continued to describe the JVP/NPP government as “worker-friendly” and praised its meagre salary increases, which fell far short of compensating for the soaring cost of living.

Openly admitting that they had suppressed workers’ protests to help the JVP/NPP, Chanaka Rodrigo, a leader of the Executive Officers’ Union, stated that the 75-day strike in 2024 was “brought to an end because the government that was about to take office made promises to us.”

Speaking ahead of the November 18 strike, JCUTU co-chairperson Dhammika S. Priyantha said Prime Minister Anura Kumara Dissanayake and Deputy Finance Minister Anil Jayantha Fernando had agreed during earlier discussions to address university employees’ grievances in the budget. Instead, he told the *Aruna* newspaper, the budget had “created further problems.”

Priyantha did not participate in the November 18 action, claiming that he was attending a discussion of the Public Sector Salary Anomalies Commission. Priyantha was among the union leaders who betrayed the 75-day strike in 2024 and worked hard to bring the JVP to power.

Ranga Meegoda, president of the Inter-University Trade Union Federation (IUTUF), declared following the November 18 protests that the unions would launch a “major struggle” to paralyse the university system and win workers’ demands from the government. In fact, the unions are seeking to contain workers’ anger and prevent them from launching a unified struggle based on an independent, socialist political program.

University workers cannot win their demands by appealing to pressuring the government, which is intensifying its attacks on the working class and accelerating the implementation of the IMF program.

Addressing a recent conference of the JVP-led trade union collective, the National Trade Union Centre (NTUC), President Dissanayake insisted that the proposed economic transformation required “breaking the old rust of the economy” and overcoming “old divisions and old attitudes.” He argued that existing laws that “obstruct the new transformation” must be amended.

The government is preparing a new “hire and fire” system that will dismantle even the limited legal protections workers currently have against arbitrary dismissal and attacks on their rights. This will facilitate the restructuring of state-owned enterprises and destruction of jobs.

The government also intends to make further cuts to social assistance, increase electricity tariffs and prices for fuel and other essential goods and services in line with IMF demands.

Dissanayake told the union delegates that they would be “the bearers of the burden of this transformation” and insisted that the trade union movement “must be transformed to suit the purpose.” In other words, the unions must enforce the government’s economic agenda and suppress resistance from the working class.

At the same time, the government is preparing to meet opposition from workers with new repressive laws. The Protection of the State from Terrorism Act and the Prevention of Organised Crimes Bill grant sweeping powers to the military and the police to harass, surveil and detain workers and criminalise strikes and protests.

Workers cannot defend their rights and win their demands through trade union bureaucracies that function as appendages of the capitalist government and international finance capital.

To wage a genuine struggle, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls for the formation of action committees of university workers, students and academics. These rank-and-file committees must be independent of the trade union bureaucracy and all capitalist parties.

Such committees are essential not only to fight for workers’ legitimate demands but also to defend free education against government attacks and unite university employees with workers in every industry in a common struggle against austerity. This fight must be guided by a socialist program to put an end to the profit system and to reorganize society to meet human needs.



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