

Sri Lankan police attack striking university workers in Colombo

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The Socialist Equality Party (Sri Lanka) condemns the savage police attack on the May 12 protest of striking Sri Lankan university non-academic workers in Colombo. The protest near the parliament was one of several similar actions that day in the cities near other Sri Lankan universities.

Up to 13,000 non-academic employees from the country's 17 state universities have been on an indefinite strike since May 2 to demand a 25 percent increase in the monthly compensation allowance (MCA) and a 15 percent pay rise to eliminate "salary anomalies."

The May 12 protest, which was called by the Non-Academic Trade Union Collective (NATUC), an alliance of several trade unions, was held near a junction of the highway leading to the parliament. Over 200 non-academic workers from the Colombo, Sri Jayawardenepura and Open universities participated in the action organised as part of the NATUC's attempt to pressure the government to grant its demands.

However, the Wickremesinghe government, in line with International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity measures has ordered police to crack down on any demonstration of workers, students and other oppressed sections opposing these measures and demanding better wages and social conditions.

The police obtained a court order to halt the NATUC's demonstration, deploying over 100 riot police officers near the junction and ordering the non-academic workers to disperse immediately. When the workers ignored the court directive the police attacked with high-pressure water cannons. Some workers sustained eye injuries from the high-speed water cannons which used polluted water.

The unprovoked assault was the second violent police attack on university employees this year. Police used

tear gas and water cannons to disperse Sri Jayawardenepura University employees during a one-day strike on January 18, when they attempted to march towards a road junction near the campus.

These attacks make clear, yet again, that the government will not tolerate even limited opposition to its IMF-dictated program. They also demonstrate the false claims promoted by the trade union leadership that isolated strikes and protests will force the government to agree to concessions.

The NATUC leadership previously told its members that Education Minister Susil Premajayantha had promised to submit a cabinet paper on May 12 which included proposals to resolve workers' demands.

The cabinet, however, did not approve the minister's proposals but sent them to the state treasury to get its recommendation. Treasury is controlled by President Wickremesinghe, who is also Sri Lankan finance minister.

Three days before the May 12 protest, Wickremesinghe told parliament that there would be no pay rises for Sri Lankan government workers, including non-academic employees.

"Salary increases for public sector can only be considered in the next year, as indicated by the economic growth in 2024 and the according increases in the state income," he said. Sri Lanka would face a "great catastrophe," if there was any diversion from his government's IMF dictated policies. In other words, the Sri Lankan working class must bear the burden of the economic crisis.

Wickremesinghe's previous proclamations that he would resolve the economic crisis in Sri Lanka by 2025 are a total fraud, as are government and media claims of stability. The Sri Lankan economy is highly unstable, with ongoing inflation and the government

sitting on a mountain of debt that has grown higher with the IMF's loans.

In recent months, workers have come forward to protest the skyrocketing cost of goods and services, wage stagnation, major cuts to public healthcare and education and the planned privatisation of hundreds of state-owned enterprises.

The government has responded by directing police to obtain court orders to suppress strikes and protests and used the Essential Public Services Act to ban all industrial action in key sectors including electricity, petroleum, health and postal. Anyone who violates the essential services laws can be harshly punished, including being sacked from their jobs, fined and subjected to lengthy prison terms.

In January this year, Ceylon Electricity Board management, under orders from the government, suspended 62 workers involved in a three-day national sick-leave campaign from January 3 to 5 to oppose privatisation of the state-owned corporation. Abandoned by their unions, these workers now face legal action over the protest.

Every section of the working class—from non-academic employees and other sections of the working class, youth and other oppressed layers—confront a political and industrial struggle against the Wickremesinghe regime and its brutal IMF austerity attacks.

The only way non-academic workers or any section of the working class can defend jobs, wages and social conditions is by organising independently of the trade union leaderships which endorse the IMF's demands and defend the capitalist system.

The NATUC leadership, however, still falsely insists that Education Minister Premajyantha's cabinet paper could be approved by cabinet by May 27, following recommendations from the ministry of finance.

This is a cynical attempt to hoodwink its members. Eight years have elapsed since the NATUC began its fight against "salary anomalies." Throughout this time, it has diverted non-academic workers into a series of harmless protests and strikes while claiming that "professional struggles" do not need politics and blocking democratic discussion among members.

The capitalist opposition parties—including Samagi Jana Balavegaya and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna—and all the trade unions are dedicated to implementing the

IMF program. Their posturing against the government, which is designed for the forthcoming elections, is as fraudulent as Wickremesinghe's claims that he will resolve the economic crisis by 2025.

As our May 1 article—"The letter sent to Education Minister by university non-academic unions deeply reveals the treacherous role of trade unions"—published on the Sinhala section of the *World Socialist Web Site* states:

"All rank-and-file non-academic members should demand the calling of a convention of non-academic workers and the union leadership give space to a democratic discussion in order to articulate a feasible program to win their demands instead of the bankrupt union policy of putting pressure on the government."

Non-academic workers must reject the NATUC's claims that it is possible to pressure the government. They should not restrict themselves to the inadequate and outdated demand for "ending salary anomalies" but fight for a decent wage indexed to living cost.

This fight can only be advanced through a unified struggle of the working class based on a socialist program against the Wickremesinghe government and its IMF attacks and the capitalist system itself. We urge all the non-academic workers to build their own action committees, independent of the union bureaucracies, to take forward this fight.



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