

Sri Lanka: Defend striking non-academic university employees! Fight for a decent wage increase!

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As the strike by university non-academic workers in Sri Lanka for increased wages and allowances enters its fourth week, the government and university authorities are preparing to suppress the industrial action.

The Kandy district court is due to hear a case today filed by Dr. Prabath Ekanayake, Dean of the Arts Faculty at the Peradeniya University, against the university's striking non-academic staff. He has called on the court to issue an order banning the current strike.

The court case is clearly a test case for similar repressive measures at other universities. An editorial on May 24 in *Dinamina*, a government mouthpiece, declared its support for the court case and attacked the striking workers. "Now non-academic workers have become a headache" that has led to "waste the children's lives for a fault that they have not committed," it stated.

The *Sunday Times* on May 19 reported that the government has decided "to enforce strict disciplinary action on non-academic staff of universities currently on strike, as undergraduates continue to face the impact of the trade union action." In particular, it has called on the deans of all faculties to ensure that all services are carried out.

According to the article, the government has advised that a 2007 circular allowing pay deductions for striking workers to remain in force. The repressive circular issued by the University Grants Commission (UGC) declares that the working days of university employees involved in any form of industrial action are to be considered unpaid.

On June 4, 2007, workers from the country's 15 universities participated in a one-day strike. Employees

at the University of Colombo, however, continued the strike against administration's decision to increase workload and introduce fingerprint machines to check attendance. University authorities suspended several workers and, on the basis of the UGC's notorious circular, cut the wages of striking employees by nine days.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) vehemently condemns the preparations for a crackdown on the strike by non-academic employees and call on all workers to defend them. About 13,000 workers from all universities are involved in the industrial action.

The University Non-Academic Trade Union Alliance (UNATUA) has made limited demands that are utterly inadequate to meet the skyrocketing cost of living. However, the government's rejection of even these small amounts shows that it will not deviate from the austerity program dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

President Ranil Wickremesinghe recently told parliament that there were various demands for higher salaries, but government income had not increased enough to implement them in 2024 and they could only be considered in 2025. Workers should place no faith in the utterances of Wickremesinghe, whose only concern is to repay foreign debts and boost big business profits.

The UNATUA leadership is the main obstacle to a political struggle by non-academic staff to defeat government's repression, win a decent wage increase and oppose the cuts to public education. The unions' present wage demand is the same as it was eight years ago. In a letter to the education minister on May 1, the UNATUA made clear that it felt compelled to call the

strike by the “pressure of membership.”

During the strike, Mangala Dabarera, president of Non-Academic Union Joint Committee (NUJC) made clear that the unions have accepted that the government cannot afford pay increases. He told a Ada Derana news telecast on May 14: “We know that there is a financial crisis in the country and therefore we said that they [the government] can grant salary increases when money is available. We have never said to increase salaries.”

The unions called off a demonstration of all university non-academic workers in Colombo yesterday on the basis of “bad weather.” In reality, the union apparatus is determined to avoid any confrontation with the government.

If this protracted struggle is left to the pro-capitalist trade union bureaucrats, it will be betrayed. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls on striking non-academic workers to take matters into their own hands by forming democratically-elected action committees, independent of the unions and the capitalist political parties to which they are aligned.

These action committees should turn to students, academic staff and other sections of workers to wage a political struggle against the Wickremesinghe government and its use of state repression. It has already imposed draconian service orders in a number of industrial sectors, and deployed armed police to violently attack workers’ demonstrations.

With the government’s backing, the Ceylon Electricity Board has suspended 62 employees who participated in a three-day protest campaign in January against privatisation. They are facing disciplinary action and the loss of their jobs.

Working people everywhere are confronting deep inroads into their jobs, wages, working and living conditions. Driven by the demands of the IMF and big business, the Wickremesinghe government is determined make workers, young people and the poor pay for the crisis of capitalism.

Non-academic workers have shown their willingness to fight, but determination and militancy are not sufficient. What is necessary is a struggle encompassing the entire working class, harnessing its industrial and political strength against IMF austerity and the government. In other words, the preparation of a political general strike against the attacks of the

capitalist government is essential.

The struggle to defend and improve the living and social conditions of workers and the poor is intimately bound up with the repudiation of foreign debt and the fight to nationalise the big corporations, large estates and banks under the democratic control of the working class.

The government and the ruling class are haunted by the April–July 2022 popular uprising that forced President Gotabaya Rajapakse to flee the country and resign. Yet the treachery and collusion of all the parliamentary parties and the trade unions enabled Wickremesinghe to come to power. What is necessary is not another capitalist government as proposed by the opposition parties, but a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies to meet the pressing needs of the vast majority of the population.

This can only be taken forward by building the unity of the international working class. Workers in the major capitalist countries are also engaged in struggles to defend their wages and jobs. The International Committee of the Fourth International has initiated the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to coordinate these struggles globally.

The SEP is ready to advise workers on forming action committees and to discuss our political program.

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