

Sri Lankan union leaders seek to sabotage university employees strike

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As the indefinite strike of non-academic employees at all Sri Lankan universities entered its sixth week, the trade unions are working behind the scene to call off the action. The claim by union leaders that university employees can win their demands by putting pressure on the Wickremesinghe government has proved to be a futile exercise.

The University Trade Union Joint Committee (UTUJC) co-chairman Dhammika S. Priyantha told the *Daily Mirror* on June 6 that union leaders had met with the State Minister of Finance, Shehan Semasinghe and reached a “certain agreement”, including over salary anomalies.

The UTUJC leader said they had submitted the proposal to the government, “outlining how this issue should be resolved. We have received minimal agreement for our demands so far. If we receive approval for our demands through the Finance Ministry or the Cabinet, we may call off the ongoing strike.”

Covering up the role of President Ranil Wickremesinghe, UTUJC leader said that the “president [earlier] rejected our proposal based on false information provided by state officials.” He claimed the ministers now understood the “reality” and had informed the president. As a result, “we have observed increased flexibility from the president regarding our issue.”

It is a lie that the president rejected the non-academic trade unions demands because he had not been informed of the “reality.” On May 27, Wickremesinghe told the cabinet that there was no budget allocation for wage increases for the state sector including university employees—other than the 10,000-rupee allowance paid earlier in the year. He said other demands can only be considered in the budget for 2025.

The unions’ proposals to the state finance minister

are indicated in a letter posted on a WhatsApp group of employees by the Independent Trade Union Centre (UITUC), affiliated to the ruling Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, and a partner of the UTUJC. The UITUC was previously known as Podujana Pragathisheeli Sevaka Sangamaya.

The letter states that the unions reached an agreement with the state minister of finance by finding money to make minor concessions to workers by “managing the allocation made to the education ministry.” In other words, the unions are advocating significant expenditure cuts to other areas of public education.

Like other unions, the UTUJC leaders acting as tools of the capitalist regime, not in the interests of their members. UTUJC co-chairman Mangala Dabarera told *Adaderana* 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.”

The union discussions with government ministers and officials took place behind the backs of union members, who have not been provided with any details.

When the strike was called, union officials made a limited wage demand of just 15 percent to rectify salary anomalies. This demand, first made eight years ago, in no way compensates for the erosion of real wages over the past three years due to high levels of inflation.

The Inter-University Services Trade Union (IUSTU), which is affiliated to the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), puts on a more radical posture despite being part of the UTUJC and supporting its treacherous moves. In the June issue of JVP newspaper *Rathu Lanka* (Red Lanka), IUSTU secretary Wijayathilake Jayasinghe commented: “These rulers cannot solve not only this issue but all issues in the country... these rulers should be chased away. We must build a rule that will

establish the rights of working people.”

The JVP unions, however, are increasingly blocking action by the working class and diverting mounting anger into a campaign for a Jathika Jana Balawegaya government, the electoral front of the JVP. The JVP unions demand that everyone supports the JJB/JVP candidate Anura Kumara Disanayake in the upcoming presidential election.

Far from improving the situation confronting working people, the capitalist JJB/JVP, like the other opposition parties, is fully committed to the IMF’s austerity policies. Disanayake has insisted “people” will have to sacrifice to “rebuild the country” during the first years of his party’s rule.

The entire political establishment, the judiciary, police and media have been mobilised in an effort to vilify and suppress the non-academic university strikers.

A *Daily Mirror* editorial on June 4 entitled “Unions must know their limits” launched a vicious attack on the striking workers, denouncing them for the impact of the strike on students. It claimed that postponing exams and post-graduate studies would mean that students would lose a year. “No trade union member or leader has the right to demand the people to postpone their life for at least one year for what they are not responsible for,” it declared.

It is not the striking workers who are responsible for sabotaging education, but successive governments, including the Wickremesinghe regime, that slashed funding for public education and providing for profit hungry investors with privatisation opportunities as part of the IMF’s austerity program.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has emphasised that neither university employees nor the working class as a whole can win their demands pressuring the government, which is implementing the IMF austerity and wants workers and poor pay for its deep economic crisis. We have explained that this illusion spread by trade unions is a trap to dissipate the rising anger among their members.

Non-academic employees cannot rely on the trade unions to fight for demands to improve wages and working conditions. They should build workers’ action committees in every university, democratically elected by employees and independent of union bureaucracy. They need to win the support of university academic

staff and students to fight to defend the public free education.

University employees need to turn to their class brothers and sisters who are facing similar attacks under the IMF austerity plan. The working class should prepare a political general strike against the Wickremesinghe government to defend their social and democratic rights.

This struggle to defend the social and living conditions of working people is closely bound up with the fight to repudiate foreign debt and nationalise the big corporations, large estates and banks under the democratic control of the working class. Workers do not need another capitalist regime, but rather a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies.

Their friends are the international working class who are in the forefront of the struggles to defend jobs, wages, working conditions and against the war and social inequality. The SEP urges Sri Lankan workers to coordinate their struggle with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) initiated by the International Committee of the Fourth International.

The SEP will hold an online meeting entitled *The Way Forward for Striking Non-Academic Workers in Sri Lanka* which will be held on this Friday, June 14 at 7 pm to discuss the issues facing these employees. We urge workers, students and university teachers and all others to participate in this meeting.

Register here for the meeting.



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