

Strong response to SEP/IYSSE meeting on Sri Lankan university workers' strike

Our reporters
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The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Sri Lanka held a successful online meeting last Friday to discuss the way forward for striking non-academic university workers. Around sixty people participated in the event, including fifteen university non-academic workers and several students.

Nearly 13,000 non-academic employees from 17 state universities in Sri Lanka have been on an indefinite strike since May 2. They are demanding a 25 percent increase in the monthly compensation allowance and a 15 percent pay rise to eliminate “salary anomalies.”

Friday’s meeting was chaired by Dehin Wasantha, a Moratuwa University employee and leading member of the SEP. He is well-known among university workers and students for his consistent fight for an international socialist perspective. Wasantha told the meeting that the ongoing 44-day strike had reached a critical point.

“University workers came into struggle because they want a pay hike to compensate for the unbearable rising cost of living. The trade union leaders have admitted they were compelled to call the strike because of the ‘pressure’ of members but they have limited the pay demand to one originally presented eight years ago.

“Despite this, President Wickremesinghe has insisted that the government cannot grant any pay increase this year because of the lack of money. It is clear that non-academic employees or other state sector workers cannot win their demands by pressuring the government. The working class needs a unified struggle to win their social demands, including pay rises.”

Wasantha referred to the anti-democratic methods of the trade union bureaucrats, explaining that they did not allow members to raise the sort of demands needed to suitably compensate for the erosion of their wages. Nor did the union officials allow any democratic discussion on how to develop the struggle to win these necessary claims.

“They—the trade union leaders—decide, and members have to comply! While there was a mass protest held in Colombo on May 7, involving about 4,000 workers including from the North and East, the unions have now limited these actions,” he said.

Wasantha urged his striking non-academic colleagues to immediately form action committees and reach out to other sections of the working class in a unified struggle against the government’s austerity measures.

SEP Political Committee member W.A. Sunil, who delivered the main report to the meeting, said that workers throughout Sri Lanka had to pay close attention to the non-academic workers’ strike.

The government, he said, has completely rejected the salary increase demands of every sector of the working class. Instead, it is escalating the attacks on the rights of all workers in line with International Monetary Fund (IMF) demands. This includes the privatisation of state-owned enterprises, increases to the price of essentials through the devaluation of the rupee, tax hikes and the imposition of sharp spending cuts on social services.

Wickremesinghe says there is no money for salary increases and insists that workers bear the brunt of the country’s economic disaster. “But why should workers shoulder the burden of the capitalist crisis?” Sunil asked.

The speaker told the meeting that the trade union leaders of the non-academic workers had publicly declared that they “understand” and “accept” that the government faces a financial crisis.

“But why should workers accept the limitations made by the government or trade union leaders on their demands?” Sunil asked. “The trade union bureaucracy is consciously attempting to isolate the non-academic workers’ strike from other workers while their union leadership counterparts are doing the same.”

The speaker referred to a June 13 IMF statement that praised the government’s austerity measures but said the economy was still vulnerable. It warned that the path to debt sustainability was on a knife-edge.

Sunil explained: “What this means is that the attacks on the social rights of the working class and poor must be intensified and that the government must not make any concessions to the working class.

“There are no solutions to workers’ demands in the crisis-ridden capitalist system. The financial meltdown in Sri Lanka is part of a world economic crisis and it is this crisis that is driving workers into struggle in other countries, including the

major capitalist countries, to defend their wages, jobs and living conditions.

“Workers must also reject the propaganda promoted by the trade unions and the opposition capitalist parties that their problems will be resolved after the scheduled elections.

“Any capitalist government that comes to power in these elections will not solve the problems of the masses but will implement IMF austerity and brutally suppress workers’ struggles. All the capitalist parties in Sri Lanka are committed to the IMF measures. What is needed is not a capitalist regime but a workers’ and farmers’ government.”

Sunil urged striking non-academic workers to take their struggle into their own hands by forming workers’ action committees in every workplace.

“No capitalist parties or trade union bureaucracies should be allowed to join these action committees, which must be elected by workers,” he said. “These committees must decide on their own demands and how to fight for them. They must fight to win support from other workers and turn to workers around the world for unity.”

Sunil stated that the non-academic employees’ trade union bureaucracy was mortally hostile to this program. He reminded meeting participants about the violent physical attack last November 30 on Wasantha and Lakshman Fernando, another SEP member, by Indika Perera and Suranga Piyawardena. They are respectively the Moratuwa University branch president and secretary with the ruling party-affiliated Podujana Pragathishili Sevaka Sangamaya. The main reason Wasantha was attacked by these officials was because he fought for this socialist program.

Sunil explained the necessity for workers to prepare a political general strike against the government and to fight for socialist policies, including placing the big corporations, banks and plantations under public ownership and democratic workers’ control and repudiating foreign debts.

During the discussion session, one participant suggested that the strike was disrupting students’ education and delaying their exams.

SEP Political Committee member K. Ratnayake answered the question, explaining that similar issues were always raised when other sections of the working class came into struggle.

When university teachers previously went on strike, they were criticised in this way. Students have also been condemned when they boycotted classes, he said.

Ratnayake cited a *Daily Mirror* editorial which blamed strikers for delaying exams and disrupting the education of the students, claiming that the strike was taking one year from the lives of the students.

He warned participants not to “fall prey to such propaganda” and pointed out that the real disrupters of the lives of the masses were the capitalist class, the government and the IMF. “We should think carefully about this issue and not on the basis of how it immediately affects us,” he added.

“The trade unions have called this strike and it continues... [but] the bureaucracy has isolated the strike, even though non-academic employees face the same austerity measures unleashed on every section of society by the government on the orders of the IMF.

“The government says there’s no money for a pay rise and to address other social issues, but it spends money squeezed from workers to pay foreign debts to the imperialists. There is no solution within the capitalist system. The working class must have a program to address the problems with the help of the international working class based on a socialist program,” Ratnayake said.

A student asked whether the ongoing strike would see the collapse of the state university system, meaning that private universities would attract students.

Answering the question, Sunil explained that the collapse of state universities would not be caused by the non-academic workers strike, but by drastic cuts to the sector and public education as a whole by successive capitalist governments.

The privatisation of education was bound up with the IMF program, he continued. Public education could only be defended in a struggle to defeat government policies.

Wasantha, another participant, asked whether the forthcoming election would see the appointment of a suitable government to resolve the issues being discussed at the meeting.

Replying, Sunil said: “It is a serious mistake to believe that the problems of the people will be resolved by the next capitalist government that comes to power. Whichever government comes into office will continue the IMF program.

“The crisis in Sri Lanka is part of a crisis of world capitalism, which is deepening as the imperialist powers escalate the war in Ukraine against Russia and in the Middle East with the Gaza genocide.

“The economic crisis and the problems of people can only be solved by a workers’ and farmers’ government which introduces socialist economic policies as part of the fight for international socialism.”



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