

Action committee denounces Sri Lankan president's threats against teachers

Teachers, Students and Parents Action Committee to Defend Free Education
8 July 2024

We, as members of the Teachers, Students and Parents Action Committee to Defend Free Education (TSPAC), condemn the threats and repressive actions of President Ranil Wickremesinghe against more than 250,000 teachers, principals and education instructors.

Wickremesinghe, who is totally against our demands for a salary increase, a reduction in the cost of student supplies and for increased government spending on public education, issued his latest threat on July 3 at a meeting of thousands of educators in Colombo.

“No one, whether directly or indirectly, should disrupt school education from 7:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. I have requested the attorney general to propose measures regarding this issue,” he declared, claiming that teachers’ strikes are “unjustified.”

Wickremesinghe also said, “Given the country’s economic situation, further increases are not feasible” because teachers’ salaries had been increased in 2022 and all government employees had recently been given a 10,000-rupee (\$US32.84) allowance.

Seeking to divide teachers across the ethnic divide, he played the communal card, saying, “Strikes did not occur in Tamil and Muslim schools... [but] that Sinhala-medium schools had to face disruptions.”

Wickremesinghe’s latest threats followed a savage police attack on tens of thousands of striking teachers demonstrating in Colombo on June 26 to demand a salary hike. Dozens of teachers were injured, including one who suffered serious damage to his eyes, in the government instigated assault.

The next day, during a visit to meet the Chief Buddhist Prelate of the Asgiriya Chapter, Wickremesinghe warned that he would bring the education service under the government’s draconian Essential Public Services Act (EPSA). All industrial action is banned under this repressive law and violations punished with harsh jail terms, heavy fines and blacklisted in future employment.

We urge every section of the working class to condemn Wickremesinghe’s threats against teachers and recognise them as an attack on the entire working class now coming into struggle over wages and their basic rights.

The Wickremesinghe government has recently listed the health, electricity and petroleum sectors as essential services.

The railways and other public transport are also designated as essential services.

Wickremesinghe cynically lectures educators on how to teach, their responsibilities and how they should behave. What arrogance! Teachers, like all sections of the working class and the poor, are desperately struggling to make ends meet.

In 2022, after a 100-day teachers’ strike, the then President Gotabhaya Rajapakse government granted just one-third of their salary demands, a meagre increase—from 3,000 to 15,000 rupees—according to their grades. It pledged to pay the remaining two-thirds over the next two years, a promise that has been ignored.

Confronted with rising working-class anger over skyrocketing inflation and major cuts in living standards, Wickremesinghe granted a 10,000-rupee monthly allowance for state employees in January. On this basis, he now insists that teachers and the rest of the working class are now in some self-sufficient state. What mockery!

Early this year a survey by the government’s Census and Statistics Department revealed one individual needs a minimum monthly income of 16,619 rupees to cover bare minimum needs, which means a family of five requires at least 85,000 rupees.

After deductions for loan repayments, teachers’ take-home pay is small, forcing many to give private tuition classes or do other jobs to pay for their basic living expenses. Around 5,000 teachers resigned from their positions last year because of low salaries.

While Wickremesinghe feigns sympathy for students, insisting that they must have continuous education, his government has drastically worsened the situation facing students.

The costs of basic school supplies, such as books and other requirements, including shoes and school bags, have doubled or in some cases trebled in recent years, forcing the children of poverty-stricken families to drop out of school. Government funding is so low that school administrations have been compelled to ask parents to pay for the cost of building renovations and other necessities.

This is the reality facing teachers, students and parents, a

situation created by Wickremesinghe's brutal implementation of the IMF austerity agenda. In line with these social attacks, the government is raking in huge revenues through increased taxes, the restructuring and privatisation of state-owned institutions, and the slashing of funds to vital services, such as education and health.

And what for? To repay huge foreign debts and boost the profits of local and international investors, while doing nothing for teachers' salary increases.

Just like free public health, free public education is now on the chopping block. Attacks on these vital social services, have been intensifying since early 1980s. This began under the government of President J.R. Jayawardene and its implementation of "open market economic policies" demanded by the IMF and the World Bank.

Wickremesinghe, who was Jayawardene's minister of education, initiated plans for the privatisation of public education with his 1981 "White Paper on Education." It was a blueprint for the systematic destruction of free public education, a right won over decades of struggle by the working class.

Mass opposition by workers, teachers and students prevented Wickremesinghe implementing all his White Paper proposals, but successive Colombo governments have implemented many. Sri Lanka has witnessed a mushrooming of local and foreign private schools, private universities affiliated to foreign universities and fee-paying courses introduced in state universities.

Colombo has also drastically cut funding to state education, the annual budget decreasing from 4 percent of GDP in 1981 to 2.1 percent in 2010. And this allocation has declined to just 1.2 percent of GDP during the following decade.

The teacher trade unions bureaucracies share responsibility for these ongoing attacks. Time and again they have acknowledged the crisis of the successive governments and abandoned the defence of public education.

In 2022, leaders of the Ceylon Teachers Union (CTU), the Ceylon Teacher Services Union (CTSU), which is controlled by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, and the United Teacher Services Unions, which is affiliated to the fake-left Frontline Socialist Party, held high-level discussions over teachers' salary demands with then Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse.

They accepted Rajapakse's claim that the government had no money because the country's economic crisis had deepened by the COVID-19 pandemic and agreed to a below-inflation salary increase. Wickremesinghe now makes the same claim, telling teachers that they must wait until the economy has recovered through the imposition of IMF austerity.

The CTU, CSTU leaders and others insist that the government can be pressurised into granting teachers demands. But how many protests, including by other sections of the working class, have been organised on this false claim since Wickremesinghe became president, all of them exercises in

futility.

Joining with other state sector unions, the teachers' union front has called a sick leave protest today, once again to "pressure" the government. The trade union bureaucrats falsely insist that the upcoming presidential election, and other ballots, will force the government to grant their demands.

Responding to Wickremesinghe's threats, the CTU and CSTU leaders thundered, "We are not scared by such threats." This empty posturing will not stop the government which is determined to implement all the IMF's demands.

Teachers, students and parents need a genuine program on which to fight for their legitimate demand for higher wages, to end the economic burden on parents, and to defend and improve free public education.

The TPSAC insists that the struggle for these demands cannot be waged if left in the hands of the trade unions, which are pro-capitalist organisations. This is the essential political lesson from past and present struggles.

We call for the establishment of independent action committees of teachers, parents and students to take forward this struggle and for billions of rupees to be allocated to defend and improve the free public education and decent salaries and all education workers.

This can only be developed as part of a broader political struggle against the government's austerity measures. That is why we are supporting the call for a political general strike of the working class to defeat the government's IMF demands, including the repayment of foreign debts and boosting profit system.

Teachers and all working people must say, we are not responsible for your crisis, which is a part of the global capitalist crisis, and take up the fight for a workers and peasants' government based on a socialist and internationalist program.

The TSPAC is holding an online meeting on July 11 at 7 p.m. to discuss this perspective and urge you to participate. Please register here to attend the meeting.



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