

Sri Lankan police attack protesting School Development Officers, detaining four

Our correspondents
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Hundreds of Sri Lankan police officers attacked a peaceful protest on Monday of about 500 School Development Officers (SDO) in the Colombo suburbs.

Four SDOs were arrested and accused of being part of an unlawful assembly, obstructing traffic and injuring police. The police later secured an order from a magistrate to hold them in remand until February 27.

This police operation is a warning to the entire working class. President Dissanayaka's Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) regime will not hesitate to crush any action by workers that challenges its pledge to fully implement the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) austerity measures.

Monday's demonstration was called by the Combined Development Officers Association (CDOA) and held outside the Ministry of Education at Isurupaya, near Battaramulla.

Although designated as Special Development Officers, these employees work as teachers in Sri Lankan schools. The protesters chanted slogans and held placards stating, "Rulers, Stop Delaying! Absorb the SDOs immediately into the teaching service!" SDOs have been involved in numerous strikes and protests over this same demand since 2021.

The 200 police mobilised to block entry to the education ministry attempted to break up the demonstration, kicking and punching the peaceful protesters. Police vehicles fitted with water-cannon were on standby near the protest. Police pushed SDO protesters off the road and onto the pavement, grabbed four activists and took them away by trishaw taxi and a jeep. Three police were injured during the confrontation.

These arrested were L.P.S. Abewickrema, H.Y.L. Perera, K.M.G. Koswaththa, and H. W. Arachchige, who were brought before Kaduwela Magistrate's Court on Monday evening. The magistrate initially ordered them to be remanded until 10 December. Those arrested were refused bail at another hearing yesterday with the magistrate ordering them to be held in remand for more than three months, until February 27.

In 2020, the government of President Gotabaya Rajapakse recruited around 50,000 graduates into the public service and in January 2022 made them permanent as Economic Development Officers (EDO).

In 2021, around 16,000 graduates were employed in the teaching service as SDOs. They are paid 6,500 rupees (\$US22.30) less per month than those with the same qualifications in the permanent teaching service.

During the demonstration, CDOA convener Viraj Manuranga told the media that SDOs, who are also subjected to competitive exams by the education ministry, have been calling on governments to officially integrate them as teachers for the past five years.

A delegation of 10 SDOs, including CDOA convener Viraj Manuranga, were allowed to meet with Deputy Education Minister Madura Senarathne following the police attack on the protest. Manuranga later told the demonstrators that Senarathne "accepted that there is a problem" and that the SDOs demands would be submitted to the cabinet.

The CDOA leadership called Monday's protest in response to the rising anger of the members over their low wages and worsening social conditions. Opposed to a unified political and industrial struggle by all public sector workers to win decent wages and working conditions for teachers and educators, the CDOA leadership is attempting to sow the illusion that the JVP/NPP government can be pressured to grant their demands.

The Colombo media has reported that some of the injuries to police were caused by sharp weapons and has attempted to blame the demonstrators. Manuranga rejected this, stating that these attacks could have been carried out by provocateurs in order to tarnish the demonstrators' reputations. Video footage shows demonstrators catching a "stranger" among the protesters and handing him over to the police.

Monday's police assault and arrest of protesting SDOs is yet another demonstration by the JVP/NPP government that it will do everything it can to crush working-class resistance

to its regressive policies. This is the real face of the “strong” government that the JVP/NPP campaigned for during the national elections.

Long-time trade union bureaucrats, who are now either JVP/NPP ministers or MPs, publicly denounced Monday’s protest.

Chandana Sooriyarachchi, secretary of the Development Officers and Graduates Association and now a ruling party MP, told the media that he totally opposed the demands of the SDOs. He is also the head of the Collective of State and Provincial State Services Trade Unions, an alliance of state sector trade unions.

Mahinda Jayasinghe, a JVP central committee member and secretary of Ceylon Teacher Service Union, is now the deputy minister of labour. He issued a statement yesterday blaming protesters for injuring police and declaring, “such unfortunate incidents have never occurred [before].” Offering no evidence for his accusations, Jayasinghe is, in fact, encouraging a state witch-hunt against the demonstrators.

On Monday, the NPP/JVP cabinet decided to appoint a “ministerial committee” headed by Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya, and including several senior bureaucrats, to prepare a “solution.”

Cabinet spokesman Nalinda Jayatissa said the recruitment of the development officers and graduates, which had been “carried out without properly evaluating their skills and professional qualifications,” was discussed by the cabinet.

“The lack of proper induction, in-service training, and clear assignment of duties has hindered the ability of these officers to meet the expected performance standards,” he said. This was also discussed by the cabinet.

This discussion, and the appointment of a special cabinet committee, makes clear that Dissanayake’s cabinet will not address, let alone grant any of the SDOs’ long-pending demands. Rather it will investigate their “performance standards.”

Monday’s protest, in fact, is just the tip of an iceberg of rising anger of millions of workers and the rural masses across Sri Lanka.

None of the social issues that precipitated the mass movement against the Rajapakse government in April–July 2022, and brought about its collapse and forced his resignation, has been resolved.

The mass upsurge was betrayed by the trade union bureaucracies and the fake-left Frontline Socialist Party who backed calls by the JVP and opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya for the discredited parliament to establish an interim regime. This paved the way for the installation of Ranil Wickremesinghe as president, who negotiated an \$US3 billion IMF bailout in exchange for the imposition of

harsh austerity measures, including high taxes, cuts to welfare and other social attacks, and throwing millions more people into poverty.

Posturing as opponents of Sri Lanka’s establishment parties, Dissanayake and his NPP/JVP claimed during the presidential and national elections that they would “renegotiate” the IMF’s harsh terms. These falsehoods, which were backed by the JVP unions, were used to hoodwink the masses. In his November 21 policy statement to parliament Dissanayake reneged on his promise, declaring his government will implement the IMF program in full.

Although fearful of a renewed mass uprising, the NPP/JVP regime, like every section of Sri Lanka’s ruling class, will do all that their masters—the IMF, foreign investors and Sri Lankan big business—require. During the general election campaign, NPP candidate Lakshman Nipuna Arachchi said that strikes will be ended by the incoming JVP/NPP administration. Monday’s violent police attack on protesting SDO workers makes clear how that will be done.

We urge workers and youth across the island to take the state attack on SDO teachers seriously, support their demands and mobilise to call for immediate release of all those arrested.

As the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has stressed, the only way workers can fight the IMF measures being implemented by the JVP/NPP and its assaults on democratic rights is by organising independently of all capitalist parties and the trade unions. None of the burning social problems confronting the working class and the urban and rural poor can be resolved under the capitalist system.

The way forward is in the fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government based on socialist and internationalist policies, including the repudiation of all foreign debt and the nationalisation of the banks, corporations and big plantations under workers’ control.

This requires the building of independent action committees by workers in every workplace, plantation and suburb along by toilers in rural areas. The SEP calls for the convening of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses to take forward this perspective.



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