

Arrested School Development Officers in Sri Lanka given bail and ordered to return to court next year

Our reporters
12 December 2024

On Wednesday, a magistrate's court in Sri Lanka bailed four School Development Officers (SDO) who had been arrested on December 2, during a protest of more than 500 SDOs outside the education ministry office in Pelawatte, Colombo.

L. P. S. Abeywickrema, H. Y. L. Perera, K. M. G. Koswatta and H. W. Arachchige were granted bail on separate 100,000-rupee (\$US335) personal sureties. The magistrate ordered them to appear before the courts on March 25 next year because the police wanted more time to investigate.

Around 16,000 SDOs, who are in fact teachers, have been serving as such since 2021. They are paid 6,500 rupees per month less than other teachers, who have been directly recruited by the education ministry. The SDOs have been constantly demanding absorption into Sri Lanka's teaching service and to be given the same rights as all other teachers.

President Dissanayake's Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government deployed hundreds of police officers to attack and disperse the December 2 protest. It was yet another indication that the new regime will ruthlessly suppress any opposition to its savage International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated austerity program.

The police have accused the four teachers of being members of an unlawful gathering and blocking traffic. Even though they are released on bail, if the court convicts them on these spurious charges, they could be jailed for no less than three years and fined.

Previous allegations included that the arrested teachers had injured three police personnel. Police officers did not identify any of the arrested teachers as perpetrators during an identification parade on December 10.

The real story of what happened at the December 2 demonstration, however, is now starting to unfold. During the protest, SDOs apprehended a stranger in their ranks and handed him over to the police. The media has since reported

that Thalangama police have said this person was an Army intelligence officer.

Yesterday, the police media division revealed that Sri Lanka's Acting Inspector General of Police has ordered an investigation into whether the police officer from Thalangama who appeared in the Kaduwela court on Wednesday told the magistrate that the apprehended Army intelligence officer was responsible for the police injuries.

During Wednesday's bail hearing lawyers for the arrested SDOs presented photos of the suspicious person hanging around with a knife in his hand. The photos were later published in the media.

As in the past, any police investigation into these events will be aimed at suppressing the truth. The person identified as Army intelligence was not mingling among protesters for fun. He may have been assigned a definite job by his superiors.

Workers must be told why this person was planted in the demonstration, and what is his name? On what grounds was he released by the police, without informing the SDOs who apprehended him?

Are the police and military intelligence operatives preparing more dirty tricks and provocations against workers coming into struggle against the Dissanayake government?

These urgent and legitimate questions must be answered. The Sri Lankan police and military were notorious for their dirty tricks operations during Colombo's 26-year communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. None of these provocations were probed.

Special Development Officers have been holding protests to demand full integration into the teaching service since 2021. The JVP/NPP leaders promised during the presidential and parliamentary election campaigns that if elected they would resolve this issue. SDOs are currently circulating a video of K.D. Lal Kantha, a top JVP union bureaucrat and now Sri Lanka's agriculture, livestock, land and irrigation

minister, making this promise during the election campaign.

SDOs and other workers are being treated with contempt by Lal Kantha and other JVP trade union leaders who have publicly supported the violent police attack on the December 2 protest.

Speaking in parliament, Mahinda Jayasinghe, leader of the Ceylon Teacher Service Union and now the deputy minister of labour, denounced the SDO protesters, accusing them of injuring police officers without providing a shred of evidence and siding with the cops.

“This protest should not have happened. We have the problem of whether this protest was launched to embarrass the government,” Jayasinghe said. He repeated the current political mantra that “The government should be given time.” Jayasinghe declared that any recruitment into the teaching service should be according to the Teachers’ Service Minutes, with competitive examinations.

Joseph Stalin, secretary of the so-called independent Ceylon Teachers Union, took the same position and denounced SDOs for demanding they be integrated to teacher service without a competitive examination.

The United Teachers Service Union, which is controlled by the fake-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), is also opposed to SDOs being absorbed in what it claims is a “violation” of Teachers’ Service rules. Other trade union bureaucracies have said nothing about the police attack or the SDOs’ demands, indicating their support for the government.

In 2021, the former government of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse provided jobs to about 50,000 graduates to dissipate the long-standing and growing demands of tens of thousands of unemployed graduates. While 16,000 SDOs were hired during this time—teaching primary, secondary and advanced level classes, as well as other educational activities, including sport—about 30,000 unemployed graduates remain jobless.

Dissanayake presided over a cabinet meeting during the December 2 protest. After the meeting, Cabinet Spokesman Nalinda Jayatissa referred to the SDOs’ demands, telling the media that “everyone must understand that the government cannot provide instant solutions to complex and prolonged issues of this nature.” In other words, no one should expect the government to grant the SDOs’ demands.

The government’s contemptuous response is in line with cost-cutting social assaults by previous administrations, including the slashing of free education and total indifference to youth unemployment. It has also revealed the treacherous role of the trade union bureaucracies and their unwavering defence of the capitalist profit system.

Last month, university student unions, which have hailed the new government, met with Prime Minister Harini

Amarasuriya, who is also the education minister. She fobbed off their demands for increased education spending, including the allocation of 6 percent of Sri Lanka’s gross domestic product to the sector, the hiring of over 12,000 university teachers and cuts in university registration fees, stating that none of this was immediately possible.

On December 7, the Collective of Workers’ Action Committees (CWAC) issued a statement calling on the working class to defend the struggle of SDOs, to demand the immediate release of the arrested teachers, and the dropping of all charges against them.

The statement said: “We declare: these four arrested teachers are the first victims of the class war being prepared against the working class by President Dissanayake’s government.

“The working class cannot allow such attacks to occur. In implementing the IMF’s ruthless austerity program, the government will take you on, sooner than later. An attack on one section of our class brothers and sisters is an attack on us all!”

The CWAC statement added: “Workers cannot rely on these trade union bureaucracies to defend their rights. The CSDOA [Combined School Development Officers Association] is falsely claiming that SDOs can achieve their demands by pressuring the government. This is a political dead end and will lead to defeat. This is why workers must establish independent action committees in their workplaces, working-class neighbourhoods and the plantations. Trade union bureaucrats and capitalist parties will not be allowed in these committees.”

Explaining that the attack on the SDOs is part of a broader assault on the social conditions of workers and the poor, the statement urged workers to fight on the following demands:

- * No to the brutal IMF program!
- * No to privatisation or restructuring, and for all SOEs to be placed under the democratic control of their workers!
- * No to the repayment of foreign debts!

The CWAC is holding an online meeting at 7 p.m. on Sunday December 15 to discuss these vital issues and urges you to attend. Please register for the meeting [here](https://www.wsws.org/contact).



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