

Sri Lankan teachers and workers must defend School Development Officers

Collective of Workers Action Committees (Sri Lanka)
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It is nearly four weeks since the December 2 police attack on protesting School Development Officer teachers (SDOs) and the subsequent arrest of seven participants on false accusations.

Around 1,000 SDOs, representing the demands of their 16,000 fellow employees, were involved in the demonstration. The SDOs are calling for their full absorption into the teaching service, and an end to the discriminatory working conditions they are forced to endure.

All the union bureaucracies, including the teachers' unions, are opposed to the SDOs' demands and remain silent about the police witch hunt.

We call on the 250,000 teachers and principals in Sri Lanka to defend their SDO colleagues, who are doing the same teaching duties but are underpaid and working under onerous conditions.

* Don't allow the trade union leadership to isolate the SDOs. Call on other workers to support their struggle.

*Workers must demand: Stop the police witch hunt of the SDOs; drop all police charges against those arrested; and grant the SDOs their demand for absorption into the teaching service.

A sinister conspiracy has unfolded against the SDOs since they held their protest early this month. While their rally outside the education ministry office gates was met with the usual police repression, three police officers were strangely injured with a sharp blade.

Four of the protesters were arrested at the demonstration. Now on bail, they are facing charges for unlawful assembly, obstructing traffic and injuring three police officers. If found guilty and convicted they face jail terms and fines.

While the four arrested SDOs were brought before an identification parade, none of the injured police officers identified them as suspects. Many SDOs believe that a stranger they apprehended during their rally, and handed over to the police, could have injured the three police officers.

Quoting police sources, the Sri Lankan media reported that the individual was an army intelligence officer. The police,

however, released him without informing the protest organisers.

On December 12, the office of the Acting Inspector General of Police issued a statement declaring that the arrested man was not an intelligence officer.

The statement, however, did not name the individual or explain why he was at the protest and on what grounds he was freed. The State Intelligence Service (SIS) was then assigned to investigate and charge other SDOs.

On December 15, the police dragged in three SDOs from different areas. One was brought before an identification parade but all the injured police officers denied that he had attacked them. The three SDOs were released and are on bail.

It now appears that the police have concocted another story, claiming that they have identified the "main suspect" responsible for injuring the police but that he has absconded. His photograph is soon to be released to the media.

The high-level character of the almost month-long police operation indicates the determination of the Dissanayake government to intimidate the SDOs and crush their struggle, and more broadly the resistance of the working class as a whole.

While the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government has a two-thirds majority in parliament and holds the presidency, it is acutely nervous about any sign of opposition to its pro-capitalist policies by any section of the working class.

The JVP/NPP came to power by exploiting mass hostility to the traditional capitalist parties that have ruled Sri Lanka for the past seven decades and which have created social devastation. The new regime has the backing of significant sections of the ruling elite which faced a historic economic collapse in early 2022 that precipitated the April–July mass anti-government uprising, forcing then President Gotabaya Rajapakse to flee the country and resign.

The mass movement was betrayed by the trade union leaders and fake-left groups, who diverted it behind the opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and the JVP and

their calls for an interim government. This opened the way for the elevation of Ranil Wickremesinghe into the presidency and the imposition of International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity attacks.

Contrary to its election posturing, the JVP/NPP government is fully committed to implementing the IMF's demands.

The new regime will not resolve any of the social and democratic demands raised by millions of workers and the poor. It is determined to crush even the mildest action by workers, concerned that this will encourage struggles by other sections of the working class.

The police repression of the SDOs' struggle is a clear indication of how this government will respond to the demands of every other section of the working class.

Teachers, health workers and others employed in government-owned corporations and in the banking sector came forward in 2023 and 2024 to demand salary increases and allowances from the Wickremesinghe government.

The trade union bureaucracies undermined all these actions, directing workers into futile protests while claiming they could pressure the government. None of their demands were granted. These bureaucrats now maintain a deathly silence over these claims. Their mantra is: "The government is new; it must be given time!"

The JVP-controlled Ceylon Teachers Services Union (CTSU), the Ceylon Teachers Union and the Joint Teachers Services Union, which is affiliated to fake-left Frontline Socialist Party, oppose the SDOs' demands.

CTSU general secretary Mahinda Jayasinghe, who is also the deputy labour minister, denounced the SDOs for holding the December 2 protest and blamed them for injuring the police. Other trade union leaders, including the other teacher unions bureaucrats, are completely silent about the SDOs' demands and the police witch hunt against them.

On Wednesday, leaders of the All-Ceylon School Development Officers Union met with chief prelates of the main Buddhist sects in Kandy to discuss the union's demands.

Dinudu Bandara, who leads the union, said that his organisation did not participate in the December 2 protest because "the government must be given time."

It was necessary, he said, to win the support of civil society and political parties and then think about industrial action. But these so-called civil society groups and the opposition parties are committed to Sri Lankan capitalism and the IMF program.

As in the past, the trade union bureaucracy, including those covering the SDOs, defend the government and employers' interests and are desperately trying to block workers' demands.

The JVP/NPP government is preparing for the next round of IMF attacks, including the brutal restructuring or privatisation of state-owned enterprises. As Dissanayake's economic advisor recently made clear, plans are afoot for the axing of more than 550,000 public sector jobs to cut government expenditure. Tax increases hitting ordinary people are also on the cards.

Whatever their most immediate form, these vicious social attacks are being unleashed against the working class in every country. Struggles against this offensive have erupted in the US, Canada, Europe and India.

The CWAC calls on workers to reject the union bureaucracies' "wait and see policy" and other efforts to politically disarm workers. Workers urgently need to form action committees at every workplace, in the plantations and other major economic centres, to organise the fight for their social and democratic rights.

SDOs must reject the appeals being made by their union leaders to other capitalist parties and so-called civil-society groups and instead organise their own action committees and turn to other sections of the working class.

The CWAC, which represents action committees built by workers in the plantations, the education sector, the ports, the garment industry, the railways, health, and among migrants and other workers, supports your fight. We have held two public meetings, on December 15 and 22, in the Sinhala and Tamil languages, to discuss the program needed to take forward this fight. These committees recognise that they are involved in a global struggle and are part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

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