

Sri Lankan government escalates witch-hunt against school development officers

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The Sri Lankan government has intensified its police-state repression of school development officers (SDOs) who have been campaigning for integration into the country's teacher service.

Eight SDOs have been charged over claims that three police officers were injured during a demonstration of about 1,000 SDOs on December 2 outside the Education Ministry in Battaramulla, Colombo.

The latest, H. K. G. B. Nelson, an SDO working as a teacher at Janapada Maha Vidyalaya school in Weeraketiya in southern Sri Lanka, was detained on January 7. He was arrested and charged at Talangama police station, after the police sent a letter to his school principal telling him to report to the station and make a statement.

Nelson was brought before a magistrate's court in Kaduwela and placed on remand until January 15. The 42-year-old is a graduate from the University of Sri Jayawardenepura and a father of two children. His pregnant wife is about to have a third child.

According to an SDO who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Collective of Workers Action Committees (CWAC), Nelson reported to the police, after being intimidated over recent weeks, including by several plain-clothes officers who allegedly threatened his family members.

Two media outlets have published baseless claims that police investigations identified Nelson as the person who injured police officers during the December 2 protest.

A report published January 9 in *Dinamina*, a pro-government Sinhala-daily, was headlined: "It was Nelson Sir who cut police officers at the protest near Isurupaya: Talangama police arrest him." *Divaina*, another Sinhala daily, published a report on the same day titled: "Development Officer in Weeraketiya who cut three police officers during the protest outside Isurupaya remanded."

The two publications effectively convicted Nelson even before he had been brought before an identification parade or the courts.

About 16,000 SDOs, who have been teaching in schools

for five years, have been fighting for full integration as teachers over an extended period. Last month's protest was because successive governments have ignored their demands.

The newly installed Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)/National People's Power (NPP) government reacted to the SDO protest by deploying several hundred police to brutally disperse the demonstrators. The administration then launched a major witch-hunt.

Four SDOs were arrested at the demonstration on bogus charges of unlawful assembly, obstructing traffic and injuring police officers. When put in an identification parade on December 7, none of the injured police officers identified them as suspects.

On December 15, three more SDOs were virtually kidnapped from their homes and taken into police custody on the same charges. One was presented to an identification parade but not identified as a suspect by the injured police officers. While the seven SDOs were released on bail, they face imprisonment and fines if convicted.

At the December 2 protest, SDO protesters identified and caught a suspicious person and handed him over to the police. He was later identified as an army intelligence officer.

In contrast to the rough physical treatment by the police of the SDOs arrested and bundled into jeeps, TV news footage showed that the suspicious individual was taken away by police, under full protection. Lawyers appearing for the arrested SDOs told the media that he had a sharp weapon in his hand.

On December 12, the Office of Acting Inspector General of Police (IGP) issued a media release claiming the suspect was not an army intelligence officer. It now appears that the police are intensifying their witch-hunt against SDOs to divert attention from this individual and cover up the real story.

Who is this person? Why did he come to the protest and on what basis was he released?

While the police have freed this individual without

answering any of these basic questions, they, and the pro-government media, now insist that the SDO who injured police officers was identified and have arrested Nelson.

An SDO teacher from a school located near Nelson's school denounced the police witch-hunt and rejected claims that Nelson had been hiding.

"Claiming that Nelson had been absconding from police is false," he told the *World Socialist Web Site*.

"During the vacation, he reported for duty on every working day. Plain-clothes police officers came several times to his home, intimidating his wife's family members and inquiring of his whereabouts. They also followed his wife's sisters.

"In one incident, Nelson's wife, who is pregnant, was rudely questioned by police at her preschool. She fainted and a preschool function was interrupted due to that," he said.

The teacher also denounced media reports for claiming, without any proof, that Nelson had committed a crime. "Schoolchildren are even saying that he has been put behind bars. I've not seen anything like this before," he added.

The police attack on SDO protesters and the ongoing repression demonstrate that the JVP/NPP government is determined to crush any struggle by the working class against its International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated austerity program.

Another acute expression is the recent banning of the lecture, "How to fight the IMF austerity program," organised by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE). The event, which was due to be held at Peradeniya University on January 3, was sponsored by the Political Science Students Association.

The IMF austerity program includes the privatisation or restructuring of more than 400 state-owned enterprises and the slashing of the state sector workforce by half a million. The Value Added Tax (VAT) and Pay As You Earn tax (PAYE) are to be continued and major cuts made to education and health expenditure.

The legitimate demands of the SDOs for their integration into the teachers' service and for the recruitment of more than 30,000 unemployed graduates into state sector jobs means these educators are coming into direct confrontation with the government and its austerity measures. In the education sector, there are more than 50,000 teacher vacancies in schools.

While the JVP/NPP government is escalating its repression against the SDOs, the trade unions covering teachers and principals are either openly endorsing the police actions or turning a blind eye. Mahinda Jayasinghe, general secretary of the JVP-controlled Ceylon Teacher Service Union and now deputy minister of labour, accused the SDOs of injuring

police officers. He made the claim in parliament without providing any evidence.

The United Teachers Union, which is controlled by the fake-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), and the Inter University Students Federation are maintaining a total silence. These unions have also lined up behind the government's fraudulent claims that special competitive exams must be held before SDOs are recruited into the teaching service.

These unions falsely claim concessions can be obtained by pressuring governments. During last year's elections, they supported the JVP trade unions, which said an NPP government would solve Sri Lankan workers' problems. They also did all they could to dissipate working-class struggles, including by SDOs, over wages, jobs and conditions.

The SDO trade union bureaucracy has no fundamental differences with these unions. Hostile to any independent political struggle by the working class, they have isolated their members, exposing them to further attacks by urging them to put their faith in the establishment parties, so-called civil organisations and the courts.

The CWAC published a statement on December 26 titled, "Sri Lankan workers and teachers must defend school development officers." It outlined the basis for a struggle to win the demands of the SDOs and to take forward the broader struggle of the working class against IMF austerity. The statement explained:

"The Collective of Workers Action Committees (CWAC) calls on workers to reject the 'wait and see' policy of the trade union bureaucracies and their attempts to disarm workers politically. In order to organise a struggle for their social and democratic rights, workers urgently need to form action committees in every workplace, as well as the plantations and all the major economic centres.

"Rejecting the trade union leaders' appeals to the capitalist parties and so-called civil society groups, SDOs need to organise their own action committees and turn to other sections of the working class."



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