

Sri Lanka: School development officers demand job permanency

Our reporters
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School development officers (SDO) in Sri Lanka protested on Monday in front of the Colombo Fort railway station demanding integration into the state teachers' service. The campaigners held handwritten placards with slogans challenging the government of president Anura Kumara Dissanayake, including, "No Harini and no committees too."

The slogan criticises Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya, also the Minister of Education, for not fulfilling her promise to look into the SDO matter and failure of two cabinet-appointed committees to resolve the issue.

The protest was called by the All Ceylon School Development Officers Union (ACSDOU) and about 60 SDOs participated. There are about 16,000 SDOs who have worked in state schools for five years performing the functions of teachers and are wanting job security and proper pay.

According to ACSDOU leader Dinidu Bandara, there are about 12,000 members in the union. The low participation indicates the union made no effort to mobilise SDOs. It organised the protest as an attempt to contain the growing opposition among its members over the refusal of successive governments to grant their demands.

The union leaders have deliberately contained the SDO teachers' struggle and subordinate it to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People Power (JVP/NPP) government and its election promises.

Speaking to the media, ACSDOU leader Bandara appealed to President Anura Dissanayake to "intervene" to resolve the issue. Even after the government has clearly reneged on its promises, he declared his faith in the president, saying: "We have a strong belief on the president. That belief has not still lost."

Bandara demagogically declared that the union would organize mass protests: "We don't fear repression. We will come to Colombo with civil forces, masses, rural forces and all other forces. We say don't let this end in bloodshed."

Dissanayake's government has already violently cracked down on SDO protests. When more than 1,000 SDO teachers took part in a protest on December 2 called by the Combined School Development Officers Association (CSDOA), the government responded by deploying hundreds of police officers. The police attacked the protesters brutally and arrested four. Later another three were arrested at their homes. Another was compelled surrender to police after they intimidated his wife and family members.

Those arrested have been falsely charged with unlawful assembly, obstructing traffic and injuring police officers. Although all of them have now been released on bail, the legal proceedings will go ahead and, if convicted, they will face imprisonment and/or fines.

The day after the December 2 protest, a cabinet meeting appointed two committees—a cabinet sub-committee led by the prime minister and another involving ministry secretaries to "look into the matter". Nothing has been heard about these committees since.

At this Monday's protest, more than 50 uniformed police officers and a dozen or so intelligence officers in plain clothes were deployed. The police prevented protesters from marching to the presidential secretariat, allowing only 10 representatives to proceed. They met the public coordination director who vaguely promised a meeting with the president or his secretary within two weeks.

At Monday's protest, ACSDOU leader Bandara did not utter a word about the police violence at the

December 2 demonstration or the victimization of SDOs. Other unions including the JVP-controlled Ceylon Teachers Services Union (CTSU), the Ceylon Teachers Union and the Joint Teachers Services Union, which is affiliated to the fake-left Frontline Socialist Party, have opposed the SDOs' demands and tacitly supported the government witch hunt by keeping silent about it.

School teachers and others workers must oppose this government witch hunt against SDO teachers and demand an end to state repression and the withdrawal of all charges. The police-state measures used against the SDOs are a warning to the working class of the repression the government will employ as it implements its harsh austerity program.

The JVP/NPP government came to power by exploiting mass anger over the previous government of President Ranil Wickremesinghe and its imposition of the IMF's austerity demands. Having promised during the election to renegotiate the terms of the IMF loan, Dissanayake has declared that its austerity measures have to be implemented in full.

SDOs told the WSWS they had been deceived by successive governments. They voted for the JVP/NPP in the hope that it would resolve the people's problems but those hopes had been dashed.

Herath, a female SDO teacher from the Ratnapura District condemned the government's claim that more time was needed to resolve the problems of SDO teachers and other workers. "Although this government claims to be a government of the people, it does not seem to be listening to the problems of the common people," she said.

"We were the first to protest against this government. We were forced to do that because nearly 700 SDOs received letters saying that they were going to be transferred to other ministries. I am against the attack on our people in the December 2 protest and the ongoing police witch hunt. Where are the committees that the prime minister promised to set up?"

An SDO teacher from Kurunegala district stated: "I voted for this government thinking that it would be good if at least a half of the NPP manifesto was implemented. But none of those [promises] are going to happen. We cannot live on the salary we receive. I work in the fields in the evenings to support my family. I have a school-age child. My wife doesn't have a job."

He said that many of the children at his school faint and collapse in the classrooms from the lack of food and their parents are unable to look after their children. "The parents' hope is to send their children for a job as soon as possible. There are not enough teachers for every subject. The teachers who work in such rural schools are granted a small allowance. But I do not have that allowance because I am a school development officer. I spend 8,000 rupees (\$US27.7) per month on transport," he explained.

Making appeals to the president and the government is futile. SDOs have to take matters into their own hands and form action committees independent of the trade union and all capitalist parties to launch a genuine struggle for their demands.

SDOs should turn to school teachers and other sections of workers, all of whom face worsening living conditions as a result of the IMF-dictated austerity measures and the global crisis of capitalism. What is needed is a mass movement of the working class and oppressed masses for a workers' and peasants' government to implement socialist policies.



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