Transforming the University Teachers' Strike into a Movement for Democracy

AHILAN KADIRGAMAR


Sri Lanka's Federation of University Teachers Association strike has crippled the state university system. The strikers' demands range from salary increases to an increase in state investment in the education sector. The strike is beginning to gain greater and greater public support as there is widespread recognition of the crisis in the education sector.

"After the July 1980 strike, the solidarity shown by personalities like the Anglican Bishop of Kurunegala Lakshman Wickremesinghe, and the famous lawyer and former Senator S. Nadesan QC, both leaders of the Civil Rights Movement to the cause of the strikers convinced us that we needed a broader coalition - initially for the purpose of securing justice for the strikers and our reinstatement. However, our individual issues became secondary to the larger issue of resisting dictatorship and so towards the end of 1980 we formed the Movement for the Defence of Democratic Rights."

These words of Wimal Fernando, an inspiring teacher, trade unionist and democracy activist, are from an interview in January 2011. Fernando was reflecting on a watershed general strike in July 1980, which led to the crushing defeat of the trade union movement with tens of thousands losing their jobs. It also paved the way for the consolidation of an authoritarian regime and a neoliberal economy under President J.R. Jayawardena. Arguably, neither the trade union movement nor social welfare in Sri Lanka have recovered from that crushing defeat, particularly with the emergence of neoliberalism. The long downturn in the global economy and the conjuncture in the mid-1970s had a similar impact on the distant and diverse economies of the US, the UK, Chile and Sri Lanka - where the authoritarian regimes led by the likes of Ronal Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, Augusto Pinochet and Jayawardena - led to the consolidation of neoliberalism.

A few years into the current global economic crisis that has shook the legitimacy of neoliberalism, and three years after a devastating civil war, new political economic questions have emerged in Sri Lanka with another significant strike. The Federation of University Teachers Associations (FUTA) have brought the state university system to a crippling halt with a wide range of demands from salary increases to a call for state investment of 6% of gross domestic product (GDP) for the education sector. The strike is beginning to gain greater and greater public support as there is widespread recognition of
the crisis in the education sector. The 6% demand is put forward as a measure that can safeguard free education. The crisis in education has been propelled by cuts to social welfare and particularly a steady decline of state investment in education, which by 2010 had reached 1.9% of GDP, one of the lowest in the world.

Nevertheless, there is a political tension between FUTA's call to safeguard and transform the entire education sector over the coming years by increasing state investment in education versus their immediate concerns of addressing long-suppressed salaries and ensuring the autonomy of the universities. It is this conundrum, reflected in the politics of a trade union strike in contrast to the long process of reforming and transforming the education sector, which this article seeks to address.

**The Strike and the Demands**

The context of the strike action by university teachers has been a history of broken promises by the government and a second wave of neoliberal reforms launched by a militarised authoritarian regime, which has been consolidating power since the end of the war. Furthermore, it is the aggressive measures of the current higher education minister that galvanised the universities. Persisting low salaries of university staff, repression of student protests, introduction of compulsory leadership training by the military for university entrants, political appointments to administrative positions and attempts to railroad university reforms, including a neoliberal bill to initiate private universities that undermines the state university system, have all contributed to the radicalisation of university space. FUTA has been clear about their demands well before they went on strike on the 4 July 2012. However, these demands have been distorted by government propagandists and the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE). Thus, it might be appropriate to reproduce here a section of the FUTA document on their demands made public on the 14 June 2012:

A. Outstanding FUTA demands regarding measures that need to be taken toward recruitment and retention of highly qualified academics be granted

A.1 Considering the crucial role that academics play in developing the country’s human resource capabilities, their specialised duties, and the stringent recruitment and promotion policy that they undergo, establish a Sri Lanka University Academic Service (SLUAS).

A.2 The immediate implementation of the remuneration step outlined in stage 2 of the interim proposal of 7 July 2011:

A.2.1 Provide an increase to the basic salary by 20%, to be paid with effect from 1 Jan 2012. All existing allowances should be paid with no conditions attached.
A.2.2 Provide an increase to the basic salary to be introduced in item A.2.1 above by 16.67%. This increased basic salary should be included in the 2013 Budget to the parliament, to be paid with effect from 1 Jan 2013. All existing allowances should be paid with no conditions attached.

B. Assurance be given to safeguard and uplift State Education An MOU be signed between FUTA, the MOHE and the Government that will:

B.1 Delineate a course of action to increase government spending on education that will reach 6% of GDP within the next 2 years.

B.2 Clearly state the government policy on state funded education.

B.3 Include an agreement to suspend all existing higher education reform processes until a proper consultative process involving all stakeholders and the public takes place.

B.4 Include an agreement to refrain from the politicization and micromanagement of the Universities so that these institutions can thrive as autonomous institutions that would act as catalysts in the development of Sri Lanka.

These immediate and long-term demands of FUTA point to a political tension between those demands that address the urgent concerns of the academic community and those broader concerns of society as they relate to the larger education sector. For example, some lecturers may question why their trade union is taking up the demand of 6% of GDP in state investment for the entire education sector. After all, this 6% demand addresses not just universities, but also schools and the broader educational infrastructure, and it will require nothing less than rethinking the priorities of both the budget and the economy. On the other hand, those forces outside the universities, whether they be teachers unions, social movements, political parties or advocacy groups, they all may question the commitment of FUTA to its vision of transforming education if it were to end the strike through a negotiated agreement with the government based on say salary increases or conditions for university autonomy.

Endgame of Strike Action and Transformation of Education

This is the interesting problem that is confronting the closure of the strike in the weeks to come. Any endgame to this inspiring strike, whether it be a victory, defeat or compromise for FUTA, will leave behind the larger question of safeguarding and transforming state education in Sri Lanka. After all, the demand for 6% of GDP in state investment for the education sector cannot be addressed overnight; it will require a process of engagement, a national policy and systemic reform that is bound to take years, including the vigilance of
state and society on a par with the one that ushered in the reforms of the 1940s that resulted in the government providing free education. Yet, it is this political tension, between the urgent concerns of university teachers and the broader concerns of society with respect to education, and the temporal question of a time-bound trade union strike and the longer-term reform of the education sector, which raise significant questions about the opening created by FUTA.

This is not a simple problem that can be dismissed nor is it a simple contradiction that nullifies FUTA's demands. First, there is the social and spatial tension of the challenges facing the university teachers. Generally, university teachers' concerns are related to problems in higher education and come out of regional centres with more resources. They are often not connected to the larger problem of widespread dispossession of education affecting rural communities and the disenfranchised urban poor, who find it hard to access decent schooling much less university education. Second, there are the political and temporal tensions that emanate from a trade union struggle. A trade union is not a revolutionary party to transform state and society nor a social movement to sustain for years the engagement necessary to revitalise the education sector. Yet, I would argue, it is the dialectics of these tensions between the social, spatial, political and temporal tensions and contradictions, that have made this current opening so important.

While the outcome of the ongoing trade union strike will be determined in the weeks to come, and certainly the transformation out of the crisis in the education sector will require a lengthy process of reform, what is clear is that a positive outcome for both is dependent on mobilisations and solidarity of varied social and political forces. The political economy of the current moment is such that a victory for the trade union action which either improves the salaries or the conditions in the universities will be critical to continue the momentum towards addressing the broader crisis in the education sector, and in turn, it is only broader social engagement towards addressing the educational crisis and resisting neoliberal policies that can also transform the universities. For example, without a much larger share of GDP in state investment for education, decent salaries for academics will not be sustainable, and in the near term may even cut into already reduced funding for schools. Furthermore, if the university teachers' struggle is crushed, in a climate where trade unions of school teachers are also fragmented and broader dissent in the country is suffocating under a post-war authoritarian regime, the crisis in education is likely to deteriorate and social welfare could be further cut with neoliberal austerity measures.

This struggle initiated by university teachers has laid bare the crisis in education spanning decades and created the opening for broader society to intervene. While FUTA requires solidarity and support, the baton on this relay to address the educational crisis has to be passed on to social movements, political parties and the public more generally to ensure the transformation of the education sector. The process that led to free education in the 1940s came out of years of agitation for social welfare by the left movement and recommendations by a three-year-long committee in the State Council led by the visionary C.W.W. Kannangara
and twenty-three independent educationists. Safeguarding free education, coming out of the current crisis and creating the momentum for a credible national policy on education may also require such a robust process with the vigilance of broader society.

Finally, a trade union strike as with any form of class struggle is ultimately determined by class forces and state power, and hence the urgency of mobilisation and solidarity. If FUTA is defeated or crushed like the July 1980 General Strike, then it would augment not diminish the need for a movement for democracy. This is the moment for conscientious activists, teachers, students, parents, clergy and lawyers, all who can be inspired by the legacy and democratic ethos of those in the previous generations who struggled for social justice, to stand up and be counted. A movement that was initiated as a trade union struggle about salaries, and extended to the concerns of safeguarding free education, may now have to become a movement to defend democracy in Sri Lanka.