

Sri Lankan government cracks down on student protest over university privatisation

Nandana Nanneththi
24 May 2001

The Sri Lankan government last week unleashed a police crackdown on thousands of university students protesting against its plans to restructure the country's tertiary education system to encourage the operation of private, profit-making institutions.

More than 6,000 students took part in a demonstration on May 17 organised by the Inter University Student Federation (IUSF) that planned to march nine kilometres from Kelaniya University to the middle of Colombo to hand a petition to the government. On the previous night the government reimposed emergency regulations making the scheduled march illegal.

Hundreds of policemen were positioned at the university entrance to prevent students from Kelaniya and other universities from assembling and starting their march. When students tried to defy the ban, police fired tear gas and rubber bullets into the crowd then baton charged and indiscriminately beat up protesters. Three students had to be treated at hospital. Even as the demonstrators were retreating, police fired more tear gas into the campus premises and attacked students who were returning home. The army also mobilised soldiers to patrol the area.

The police attack on the demonstration is the sharpest warning yet that the government is prepared to push ahead with its education reforms regardless of the opposition of students.

In a special interview in the government-controlled *Daily News* on the day of the demonstration, the Minister of Higher Education, Indika Gunawardena, insisted that the country's national universities would not be privatised. In the same breath, however, he said: "What the government intends is to procure the services of the private sector institutions to make their academies degree awarding institutions in accordance with the needs of modern times".

By establishing private, fee-paying educational bodies to compete with public institutions, the government is laying the basis for further undermining the existing university system that is already starved of funds. Citing an Asian Development Bank report, Gunawardena went on to say that private sector institutions should be able to award degrees—in other words, have the same educational status as universities.

The government has been attempting to restructure tertiary education for the last three years but has been largely unsuccessful due to the resistance of students. It declared 1997 to be the "Year of Education Reforms and made far reaching proposals to make inroads into public education in three sectors—the universities, the teaching service and schools. A commission headed by Professor L. Jayathilaka called for the participation of private enterprise in planning and preparing university courses to provide skilled labour for business, and also called for the curbing of student councils.

The proposals provoked widespread protests by students and also teachers in 1997 and 1998 forcing the government to delay their implementation. In 1998, an attempt to establish a private medical college with the backing of foreign investors was withdrawn due to strong student opposition. Even so the universities have begun to charge for some courses, including textile technology, mechanical engineering and

computer technology. At the Colombo University, the computer education section has been set up as a separate institute where students pay for their courses.

Both the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund are insisting, however, that the government has to proceed with the opening up of education to the private sector. Their demand is part of a broader agenda of public sector restructuring that includes making further inroads into public health and welfare services and the privatisation of state-owned enterprises including the Port Authority and a number of banks.

A meeting of the Sri Lankan Development Forum (Sri Lanka's major donors including the World Bank and IMF) in Paris last December recommended, in relation to the country's universities, that the government had to conduct "higher education on the basis of a business enterprise like the market economy." The report by forum chairperson and World Bank official Mieko Nishimizu underscored the necessity for the government to end free education and force students to pay if the country was to receive further loans.

"A number of donors reiterated the need to make the supply of university graduates more responsive to the demands of industry and global market place and the need for technical and vocational education to receive more resources to this purpose," the report stated. "Other speakers commended the government for their efforts to open the system to the private sector a trend that was occurring worldwide. A number of donors questioned the provision of free education and urged the government to institute policies that would make those who could afford to pay for tertiary education to do so."

Higher Education Minister Gunawardena indicated the support of the Peoples Alliance government for the IMF/World Bank demands during the debate on the budget last month. "Our country has entered into the path of capitalist development under the open economy," he said. "[So] the government is accepting the recommendations of the World Bank to allow the private sector in the university education."

Gunawardena, who is a leader of the Communist Party of Sri Lanka, sought to justify the involvement of private institutions in tertiary education by saying the universities were only able to provide places to just 3 percent of those who enter primary education. Last year, however, the government cut its overall spending on education from 2.6 percent of GDP in 1999 to just 2.5 percent, as part of other cutbacks to finance a huge increase in arms spending following military setbacks in the country's protracted civil war.

Over past few years, the intake of university students has stagnated. Gunawardena explained last week that out of the 91,676 young people who qualified for university entrance only 12,000 or just 7.5 percent would be admitted—the lowest rate of any country in South Asia. Universities are so strapped for funds that their administrations are proposing that outsiders be able to use their libraries for a fee and to hire their halls.

Students face an increasingly difficult situation as a result of successive

government cutbacks to university funding and facilities. Over the past seven years of the PA government, the cost of living index has jumped by 87 percent from 1520.7 in August 1994 to 2829.2 in April 2001. The rising prices have eroded the value of allowances and left many students living in poverty and unable to afford basic items needed for study.

Students from low-income groups receive a meagre monthly grant of 1,450 rupees (\$US16). The majority of students have no access to hostel facilities and the minimum fee for food and lodging is around 2,000 rupees per month. In some cases, students from remote rural areas have to try to “save” money from their grant to help their families.

Commenting on his financial situation, a student at Ruhunu University, 160km south of Colombo, said: “We are compelled to eat the 10-rupee low grade meal from the university canteen because we cannot afford to pay 35 rupees for an outside meal.”

Another undergraduate said: “A student, for example, in the management section has to spend 100 rupees a month on photocopying charges. A bundle of half sheets cost 250 rupees. Travelling expenses are around 400 rupees per month and the concessionary 100-rupee season ticket is worthless due to the lack of state buses in which it can only be used. A university student needs clothing and some entertainment like films or concerts. The authorities do not consider these as social needs. We are looked on as a herd of cattle.”

A senior university teacher, who has researched the conditions facing students, noted in the *Daily News*: “The places they stay are sordid on both social and health grounds. No serious studies can be pursued even in the presently available university hostels. They are overcrowded and each room is illegally occupied by eight or nine students. A bed outside [the hostel] would cost too much and the atmosphere is not conducive to studies at all.

“Sixty seven percent of the students are ill-nourished, 82 percent of students come from poor rural families... [and] 78 percent consume a bun and a cup of plain tea for breakfast and nothing more. For lunch they share a publicly sold, often unhygienic, packet of rice. The quantity and quality of the food intake make them totally unfit for studies or sports. This will give us a generation of ill-nourished young men and women. In future it will become a big problem.”

In order to impose its education policies, the PA government is not only resorting to police repression against demonstrators but in recent months to systematic intimidation and outright thuggery. Leading PA politicians have targetted the Inter University Student Federation (IUSF), which is affiliated to the Sinhala extremist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), and used gangs of thugs to physically attack IUSF supporters and other students. In some cases, individuals have been kidnapped or faced death threats.

At the Kelaniya University on February 10, a gang of thugs set fire to the student council office causing 2.5 million rupees worth of damage. Although the student council complained to the police and university authorities, no action has been taken. Students allege that the inaction is the result of pressure from government politicians.

A student of the Ruhunu University commented: “When we fight to improve our conditions, the governing party looks on us as common criminals. The students are very restless because of this.” Because of the threat posed by thugs on campus, most students at the university have kept away from the library in the evenings even during the recent examination period.

Over the last 30 months, 263 have been deprived of their student status or been subject to other forms of punishment including the cutting of scholarship money and state education grants. Most of those affected have been student council representatives or other student activists.

While students are hostile to the government's plans for private education and the introduction of fees, the JVP and their IUSF offer no way out. Formed in the late 1960s, the JVP appealed to rural youth on the

basis of an eclectic program that combined Maoism and Castroism with Sinhala chauvinism. In the 1980s, in the midst of an Indian-brokered attempt to end the civil war, the JVP denounced the government as unpatriotic, demanded the withdrawal of Indian peacekeeping troops from the north and carried out fascistic attacks on trade unionists and workers who refused to join their campaign.

The JVP was brought back into the fold of official politics in 1994 following the election of President Chandrika Kumaratunga and the Peoples Alliance and has made inroads among university students as a result of growing disillusionment with the government. The IUSF practices its own form of thuggery on campuses against those who oppose them, and in doing so provide the pretext for PA politicians to use their goon squads.

Behind their empty radical rhetoric about defending students, the IUSF limits the demands of their demonstrations to appeals to the very authorities that are responsible for undermining of university education. It is conducting a petition campaign directed to the government and plans to appeal to the European Union over incidents of government thuggery. It is worth noting that the EU was one of the main instigators behind demands at last year's Sri Lankan Development Forum for the privatisation of university education.

The IUSF campaign is thoroughly imbued with Sinhala chauvinism. In their leaflets, the appeal to defend education is couched in nationalist terms, as necessary “to build our country into a cradle of science, art and culture.” During the latest protest, the front sought the support of the Buddhist hierarchy, which is notorious for supporting the war and opposing democratic rights for the Tamil minority. IUSF supporters have repeatedly been involved in campaigns to oppose any move towards a negotiated end to the war.

Yet the undermining of university education is the direct outcome of the war. The government has only been able to finance its military machine by slashing spending to education and other essential services. Any campaign to defend public education has to be bound up with a broader perspective aimed at unifying the working class and oppressed masses—Sinhalese and Tamil—to end the war and remake society along socialist lines.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact