

Sri Lankan fine arts institute suffers drastic cuts

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Successive government financial cuts to the Institute of Aesthetic Studies (IAS) in Sri Lanka are slowly destroying the country's premier institution for higher studies in the fine arts and performing arts. Many of the country's leading and veteran painters, musicians, dancers and sculptors are the graduates of the institute and some are currently on its academic staff.

But the cutbacks have led to a stagnation of the facilities, a virtual freeze on the size of the academic and non-academic staff and lack of financial support for students. Of the institute's 1,500 students, about 1,200 are crammed into a congested one-acre campus that houses the music and dance departments. The remainder, who study painting and sculpture, are based on another site about a kilometre away.

There has been no significant improvement to either campus since the academy, which was previously known as "Haywood" or the Government School of Music, was affiliated to the University of Kelaniya in 1974. No new buildings have been built in nearly a decade.

The instruments and equipment available to students have not been upgraded. No steps have been taken to develop the curricula in line with changes taking place in the field of arts internationally such as computerised music, computer-aided design and the development of Western classical music.

There has been compounded a sharp decline in the institute's budget over the past four years. In 1998, the government allocation was a meagre 78 million rupees (about \$US800,000). It was cut to 74 million in 1999, 67 million in 2000 and 57 million in 2001—an overall drop of 27 percent.

The lack of funding for the IAS is part of an overall cutback to education by successive governments. In 1992, a decade ago, government expenditure on

education represented 2.95 percent of the country's gross national product. By 2001, the level had fallen to 2.02 percent. Students at other universities and tertiary institutions are facing similar problems.

IAS students have not received their allowances for months. After a lengthy delay, second, third and final year students were paid for June, July and August on October 1. But first-year students who enrolled in mid-May have not received their allowances for five months and are unlikely to be paid for another two months. Officials say the delay is due to registration formalities, hampered by a lack of staff and equipment in the student service section.

Sandya Sujani, a first-year dance student told the WSWs that her studies were being severely hampered. "The dance students have been divided into groups. There are 43 students in my group. The largest hall is about 30 feet by 40 feet. The teachers cannot pay attention to all the students, as there are so many.

"Practicing in front of a mirror is impossible, as such a facility is not available. There are only three toilets. The changing room is a makeshift arrangement. There is a drainage line and a blossoming tree in the middle of this room. Even the teaching staff don't have adequate chairs, desks and equipment."

The lack of facilities has caused a long delay in admitting new students. About 750 students who passed their university entrance exam in 1997/98 were finally admitted in 2002. The current final year students passed their entrance exam in 1994 and are now 28-30 years old. Most have to work part-time to support themselves and their families. Many of the female students are married with children.

The institute has only four hostels. In the female hostel, there are seven students to each small, 7-by-7-metre room. Of the 750 first-year students, only

150 have hostel facilities and remainder have to find private board, which many cannot afford. Lodgings cost around 3,000 rupees a month, and students, when they are paid at all, receive a monthly allowance of only 1,450 rupees. As a result, some students travel from areas over 100km from Colombo each day, adding to expenses.

Dharshani Abeysinghe, first-year music student, told the WSWs: “My town is Chilaw, 110km from Colombo. I couldn’t get hostel facilities. My father is a retired cooperative clerk and our family’s income is not enough to cover expenses in Colombo. Previously I worked at FDK Lanka for over a year and earned a basic monthly salary of 3,700 rupees. That income was a great help in educating my sister and brother. Now my family has to bear my expenses as well. We are not getting the allowance.”

Teachers are also dissatisfied that they cannot provide students with a better education. Senior music lecturer Ranjith Fernando explained: “Compared to other universities, there is a long delay in admitting new students to this institution. Although teachers and even the university grants commission have complained, nothing has happened. The main reason is the lack of buildings and resources. No government has worked to develop this institution.”

There is growing frustration at the worsening situation but the student and trade union leaders have diverted the opposition into a futile dispute that has divided staff and students. In mid-August, the student council organised a protest over the delayed payment of students’ allowances that was directed against the employees at the student service centre, rather than the government. A heated argument and a fistfight broke out whereupon the student council began to agitate for the transfer of seven of the staff involved.

The trade unions covering non-academic staff responded by calling a strike to demand a “fair and impartial inquiry” into the clash and the transfers.

The student council launched a sit-in protest, which was backed by the Inter University Student Federation (IUSF)—an organisation controlled by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—and claimed that it had won “a great victory for students” when orders for the transfer of the seven employees were issued. When the staff refused to accept the transfers and continued their strike, the student leaders demanded that the university

take action against the strikers. The staff trade unions caved in and called off the strike on October 21.

The “great victory” has done nothing to alleviate the situation facing students and has created animosity between students and staff. As one of the victimised clerks explained, the staff are working under appalling conditions. “Only four officers are engaged in the students’ services section to handle all the work. We have a single computer for the whole workload. The printer has not been working for a whole month. Although we have requested more staff and computers, nothing has been done,” he said.

Students are still not being paid their allowances and the student council leaders are silent. What is needed is a joint struggle by staff and students in IAS and other institutions against the real culprits—the government and its big business program—and the financial cutbacks being imposed. But that is something that the JVP-controlled IUSF, despite its occasional rhetorical references to socialism, is completely opposed to.



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