

Prolonged protest by unemployed Sri Lankan graduates

Our reporters
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Hundreds of unemployed Sri Lankan graduates have been engaged in maintaining a permanent protest outside Fort Railway Station in central Colombo. The campaign, which has now entered its second month, is to highlight the chronic lack of jobs faced by those who have completed their university studies.

Each day 10 to 20 protestors take part in the vigil—fasting for 24 hours, talking to passers-by and collecting donations. The campaign, which has been organised by the Joint Union of Unemployed Graduates (JUUG), has also involved demonstrations and “sathyagrahas” or sitdown protests on the outskirts of the capital.

The JUUG is demanding the United National Front (UNF) government immediately find jobs for all unemployed graduates and outline a national policy to generate jobs for the future graduates. A JUUG spokesperson explained that Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe had not responded to a letter calling for a meeting to discuss the protestors’ demands.

Officially the number of unemployed graduates is around 25,000. But according to the JUUG, the figure is much higher: between 35,000 to 40,000 for the age group of 25-40. The unemployment rate is particularly high among graduates in Arts subjects and among females. Many of the unemployed are from poor rural areas and face significant economic hardships.

Both major parties—the ruling UNF and the opposition Peoples Alliance (PA)—have played a major role in destroying public sector jobs and thus employment opportunities for graduates. According to the 2003 Central Bank annual report, the public sector share of employment share has fallen from 21.5 percent in 1990 to 13.4 percent in 2002.

Thousands more jobs are due to be scrapped through so-called voluntary retirement schemes at the Central

Bank and Salusala, a government-owned cooperative textile shop. Thousands more casual employees have lost their jobs at the Port Authority, Ceylon Petroleum and the Cooperative Wholesale Establishment as a result of the government’s drive for increased productivity. Several hundred jobs at the Peoples’ Bank were axed during 2002 through forced retirement and non-replacement. More jobs will be lost as the UNF government proceeds with plans to privatise state-owned enterprises.

The JUUG is affiliated to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—a party that combines Sinhala chauvinist appeals to “defend the nation” with socialist phrasemongering. One of the JVP sympathisers at the protest told our reporters that graduates did not want to work for private enterprise “owned by foreigners” but wanted the government to expand employment so they could work “for the people”. But both the UNF and the PA have been slashing jobs and services “for the people” to restructure the public sector to the needs of business—foreign and Sri Lankan.

The protest has drawn a variety of students from different backgrounds and political outlooks who are looking for a way of opposing the government’s policies. A number of them spoke to the WSWs about the situation confronting graduates.

Lakmini, 29, from Matara district on the southern tip of the island, explained: “I got through the Advanced Level in 1993 and entered university in February 1996. I got a special degree in geography in June 2000. Three years have passed since graduation and still I have no job.

“My parents spent money on education under very difficult conditions. In our family there are 10, five brothers and four sisters plus me. My father was a mason and now he is 73. He cannot work. Mother

doesn't have a job. Two of my brothers are working as private bus drivers and another is practicing masonry. Another brother passed his entrance exam but couldn't get a university place. He did various courses in English and computers but is still unemployed.

"I have applied for various jobs but didn't get chosen. I cannot work in a garment factory, as I have no knowledge of sewing. Marriage is also a problem. Every suitor asks whether I have a job or else for a dowry. My parents have no money or assets for a dowry. So now I am a burden to my parents and to society."

A. Renuka, 25, from Kurunegala to the north of Colombo, explained that she had graduated in Arts from Peradeniya University this year. "I applied for about 25 jobs after the graduation and received only eight responses. First I joined a garment factory at Kurunegala but had to leave due to the unbearable working conditions. Then I worked in a book shop and finally in a gem cutting firm.

"In the last job, there was a three-month training period during which the monthly training allowance was just 1,200 rupees (\$US12). But if a stone was damaged, they deducted 400 rupees. In some months my whole allowance went on deductions. I had to leave because of the severe exploitation. Now I don't have a job. The money earned by my father is not sufficient and life is very difficult.

"All governments promise to solve this problem before they come to power. Nevertheless, they don't solve our problems and the unemployment problem as a whole. The government not only deceives us but also attacks our campaign using thugs and the police."

Duminda Jasyathilake said that he had graduated from Colombo University in 1999. "I made numerous job applications and even applied for jobs as a pattern maker in garment factories. I also sat for a number of recruiting tests in the public sector but without any success. The government says that we must join the private sector, as there are no jobs in the public sector. But the private sector tells us that we don't possess the necessary technological know how.

"Age is also a problem. They prefer young people—18 to 25 years old. Although the government claims there are no public sector jobs, there are plenty of vacancies in the central government as well as in the provincial governments. Provincial authorities say they have

vacancies but can't recruit anyone as the central government hasn't provided any funds. The UNF government has stopped all recruitment programs under the direction of the World Bank."

The protest outside Fort Station has gained significant support from passersby. A group of school students stopped and gave a donation to the protest, saying: "If you do not have jobs, is there any point in us learning?"

A railway worker said: "The government should have a policy to provide employment for graduates. Today a great deal of dedication is required to get a degree with the prevailing competition. What is the purpose if there are no jobs after graduating? My son is in grade 10, studying in Anuradhapura. Only 295 are chosen for university [each year] from there. My son asks whether there is any use studying with such competition. The government is not only refusing to recruit but is cutting down on the number of jobs. They are getting ready to privatise the railways and a few thousand may lose their jobs."

Evans, a production assistant at a private firm, told the WSWS: "Their struggle is fair. It is the government's responsibility to provide employment for graduates. My sister-in-law obtained a special degree in archeology in 1998 but is still unemployed."

In response to growing public concern over the plight of the unemployed graduates, the government has made a few token moves to provide jobs. Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe appealed to a forum of businessmen last month to help solve the unemployment problem. They offered to recruit up to 14,000 unemployed youth, including 5,000 unemployed graduates, as trainees but only if the government provided 2,000 rupees of the 6,000 rupee monthly training allowance.



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