

Sri Lanka: Police attack teacher trainee protest

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8 June 2004

Police using batons and tear gas attacked a protest march organised by teacher trainees from the Pattanai Sripada College of Education on May 28, leaving at least 20 people injured. Eight of the students and their supporters had to be hospitalised—two in a critical condition. This is a further instance of police violence directed against protesters in the central hill districts of Sri Lanka since the United Peoples Freedom Party (UPFA) came to power after the April 2 election.

The government teacher training college is located near Hatton in the central plantation area of Sri Lanka. Most of the students are Tamils—many the sons and daughters of low-paid plantation workers. They study for three years to become teachers—the first two as residential students and the final year as interns attached to schools. Currently there are about 780 residential students and 250 interns.

About 2,000 students, parents and teachers took part in the May 28 march to demand that the college be reopened. The administration shut the institution on April 23 after a protracted conflict with students over the lack of facilities and allegations of official corruption. The demonstrators were also calling for the withdrawal of charges laid against 15 students in the course of the dispute.

As soon as the march began from Dunbar Ground in Hatton, a senior police official warned the protestors that he had orders to “stop this march”. Students and parents insisted on their right to march and defied the police, who made several attempts to disrupt the march before retreating to a road intersection. When the march reached the junction, the police, who had their faces covered with masks, began to attack indiscriminately with tear gas and batons. A number of protestors struggled to breathe and vomited as a result of the tear gas. Even those who attempted to flee were chased and beaten.

The conflict with the college administration has been going on for more than two months. It began over the lack

of facilities and staff, along with allegations that management was misusing student monies. Residential students only receive a monthly allowance of 1,500 rupees (\$US15), from which the administration deducts 1,350 rupees for meals. Suspecting that university officials were misappropriating the funds, students took over the catering. A student committee ran the hostel kitchen for five months from last September, and about 200,000 rupees was utilised for student welfare.

On March 19, however, the food committee representatives asked the registrar about a delay in a payment due to a local shopkeeper who provided basic food items. The registrar and chief clerk continued to stall on the payment, eventually provoking a clash with students. The police used the incident to charge 12 students, including several who were not involved. A. Vijayamohan, for instance, was detained at his home in Ratnapura, where he had been on leave.

The teacher trainees immediately began to campaign for the release of the 12 students and against the administration’s financial practices. Management responded on April 23 by shutting the college. The police finally released the detained students but each of them was charged, together with three others.

The dispute over allowances is just one of a series of grievances. Students point to the lack of lecturers: only two are allocated to teach science; there are none for music or dance. Two lecturers were hired from India last year to teach music and dance, but they left in January, complaining about the lack of facilities at the college. The library does not have sufficient books—new or old. None of the lecture theatres have audio facilities.

The student hostels are cramped, with four students sharing a 2 metre by 2 metre room. There is no clinic and the laundry facilities have been cut back. Students have to clean the toilet facilities, as no cleaners are hired. On top of that, students feel they are being robbed by college

officials—most of whom have connections to the ruling political parties.

Interns who have finished their residential studies face other problems. They receive a monthly allowance of just 2,000 rupees, making it difficult to find any, even basic, accommodation. Ajith Singh told the WSWs: “During the intern period we have to pay for our board, food and bus fares. And there are additional expenses for stationery and other items to prepare project reports. So we need at least 5,000 rupees per month.” Even though Ajith and his classmates graduated last December, none have been given teaching appointments and thus face severe financial difficulties.

S. Premkumar, a teacher trainee, told the WSWs: “We have carried out several campaigns to defend our rights—boycotting a meal a day, fasting and *sathyagraha* (sit-in-protest). During our [recent] struggle, the [former] college president S. Muralitharan appeared early one morning at 2 o’clock, along with the local police inspector Senthil and warned us to stop our struggle.

“We informed all the political parties and unions but nothing took place. We met with Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) leader Arumugam Thondaman but he refused to intervene in this matter. The former college head Muralitharan is very close with the CWC. We also met with Upcountry Peoples Front (UPF) leader P. Chandrasekaran who promised to take action but again nothing happened. That is why we organised this demonstration to inform people about our problems.”

N. Satheeswaran from the Annfield Estate in Dickoya was arrested by police. He told the WSWs: “When the police came to my house, my parents had gone for work. I was not there and the house was locked. But the police searched around the house, then went to my father’s work place to ask about me. The police treated us like criminals. But the ones who robbed college property are allowed to move about freely. The police take no action against them.”

A. Vijayamohan explained to the WSWs that he had been falsely charged. “On March 15, I got leave from the college and went to my home in Ratnapura for my sister’s wedding. So I was at home in Ratnapura when the March 19 incident took place. How could I have been involved in this incident? They framed up me. Now I have to face the Nuwara Eliya courts on October 12.”

None of the plantation workers organisations have supported the students. The CWC, a trade union and political party, blamed the trainees themselves. CWC deputy leader M.S. Sellasamy told the media: “Many

people who participated in the demonstration organised by the Sripada trainee teachers were injured. The organisers must take responsibility for that.” Local officials from the UPF took part in the May 28 march but rapidly disappeared when the police intervened. The UPF leadership issued no protest over the police attack.

The Maoist New Democratic Party (NDP) helped to organise the march but is attempting to direct the protest in a racist direction. The NDP sent a letter to President Chandrika Kumaratunga complaining that after the college was shut, the government had replaced former college president Muralitharan with a Sinhala official. “This is betrayal of upcountry Tamil students,” the NDP declared.

Several students have opposed the attempts to divert the campaign along divisive communal lines. They point out that the initial campaign was against a Tamil administrator.

Prior to the May 28 march, a student leader told the gathering: “Based on our auditing report we exposed the administration’s corrupt activities. But no legal action was taken. Some people are trying to discredit our struggle by claiming that we are fighting to remove a Sinhala administrator. But we are not concerned about which community the administrator comes from.”

The May 28 attack on Sripada college students is the second case in which the police have been involved in an assault on protesters in the plantation districts. On April 28, the police and military shot dead two Tamil workers after tensions flared in the town of Kandapola in Nuwara Eliya over an apparently minor traffic incident. Far from attempting to calm the situation, the police sided with Sinhala thugs to inflame the conflict. The killings provoked a strike by more than 400,000 Tamil plantation workers.

The atmosphere of communal tension in the plantation districts and elsewhere is the political responsibility of Kumaratunga and the UPFA which, in a desperate bid for votes, deliberately whipped up Sinhala chauvinist sentiments in the course of the campaign for the April 2 poll.



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