

Sri Lanka: JVP student leader physically threatens ISSE campus team

Our correspondents
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In an act of political thuggery, members of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) broke up an International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) campaign at the Peradeniya University in Sri Lanka on Tuesday with threats of physical violence. The JVP's actions are a desperate attempt to suppress discussion and opposition among students to the Sri Lankan government's resumption of communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and its savage attacks on living standards.

Members of the ISSE and Socialist Equality Party (SEP) had set up a book stall in the Arts Faculty and were campaigning against the US-led occupation of Iraq and the renewed civil war in Sri Lanka. The team was distributing a leaflet in Tamil and Sinhala and displaying a range of Marxist literature, including translations of the works of Leon Trotsky and *World Socialist Web Site* journals.

Peradeniya University, near Kandy in central Sri Lanka, is one of the country's most prestigious tertiary institutions, with a student population of around 16,000. The SEP—and its forerunner the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL)—has a long history at the campus, which was a hotbed of political ferment in the late 1960s and early 1970s, particularly during the anti-Vietnam war protests. The ISSE had applied for and received written permission to conduct this week's campaign.

The book stall provoked animated discussion—among Tamil and Sinhala students alike—about the ISSE's policies and program. No other organisation advances a socialist and internationalist alternative to the US occupation of Iraq and the civil war in Sri Lanka. Many students were not only hostile to both wars but to the government's undermining of public education. One measure of the interest was the sale of 3,800 rupees (or \$US38) worth of books and pamphlets—the equivalent to a

month's wages for many low paid workers.

The sight of a steady stream of students engaged in political discussion with the ISSE clearly disturbed the JVP, which, through its Inter University Student Federation (IUSF) has dominated a number of campuses over the past decade through a mixture of Sinhala chauvinist politics, intimidation and violence. The JVP backs the bourgeois government of President Mahinda Rajapakse, and demands an intensification of the war against the LTTE. Its past false claims to be “socialist” or “Marxist” have been all but jettisoned.

JVP members and sympathisers hung around the ISSE stall watching what was happening. Then, at around 10.30 a.m. its members decided to act. One of the group came up to the ISSE tables, leafed through some of the literature and bought a couple of books. When ISSE members tried to engage him in discussion, he repeated the standard JVP line on campuses—he was not interested in party politics but only in “politics beneficial to students”. This formula is used to ensure the dominance of the JVP's politics and the suppression of any political criticism.

Free education, the JVP member declared, had been won by students through their past protests and struggles. An SEP member pointed out that this claim distorted reality. He said that free education, like a number of other social gains in Sri Lanka, had been won in the 1940s and 1950s by the working class under the leadership of the Trotskyist movement—the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India (BLPI) then the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP). Students and young people had been involved as part of this broader movement.

Unable to challenge the ISSE politically, the JVPers decided to resort to other methods. One of them demanded to know on whose authority the book stall had been set up. When told of the university registrar's permission, the JVP member declared that the ISSE had a

permit to display books, not to “agitate” among students. Without the student union’s permission, he said, no one was allowed to hold an event on campus.

In fact, no such authorisation is necessary and the ISSE had openly publicised the stall for several days. After notifying the registrar of the harassment, the ISSE continued its campaign.

Despite continuing noisy threats, students continued to approach the stall, which was, itself, significant. The JVP, including its student members, is notorious for backwardness, threats and violence. In the late 1980s, JVP hit squads murdered hundreds of political opponents, union leaders and workers, including three RCL members, who refused to join their chauvinist campaign against the Tamil population and the Indo-Lanka Accord. As students explained to the WSWs, the current JVP student leaders at Peradeniya University are known by nicknames such as *Wal Ura* or Wild Boar and *Mora* or Shark.

In one of the worst recent incidents, a gang of some 200 JVP thugs armed with stones and clubs broke into a meeting at the Jayawardenepura University in November 2002 and viciously attacked the participants. Samantha Vithanage, a third-year management student, was bashed, fell to the floor and had a computer monitor dropped on his head. He later died in hospital. Thirteen other students were seriously injured. Vithanage’s “crime” was that he had campaigned against the JVP’s backward practice of “ragging”—forcing first year students to engage in demeaning acts.

Determined to break up the ISSE’s campaign, student union leader Chinthaka, better known as “the Shark”, approached the book stall and loudly proclaimed that ISSE and SEP members had to “get out forthwith”. Otherwise, he declared, “the situation and consequences will get worse.” When asked if he was making a threat, he boasted: “Yes we are. Can’t we make a threat! If you do not go we will forcibly eject you.” He menacingly named an ISSE member at the university and warned: “If he enters this campus again, we will beat him up.”

SEP and ISSE members responded by condemning the JVP’s anti-democratic actions. However, other students, while not agreeing with what had taken place, were well aware of the consequences of the JVP’s warnings and left the area. Given the threats of violence and the de facto break-up of the campaign, the ISSE and SEP decided to pack up and leave.

One lecturer, who witnessed what had taken place, later told the WSWs: “I was there when a group intervened to stop the literature sale of the SEP/ISSE. I clearly

recognised one of them to be the president of the Student Union. I do not know his name. I am concerned with what happened because it’s a violation of the most fundamental right of the free exchange of ideas so necessary for intellectual development.

“I think it is a debasement of the status of the university as a haven of intellectual discussion and debate. I told the students who had gathered, ‘You have a library full of literature with so many different intellectual currents. You have the Internet. In these circumstances, this attempt to police thought is senseless. You must defend the right to express ideas. Why are people so afraid of ideas?’”

The JVP is afraid of any political challenge precisely because its policies have become increasingly unpopular among students and working people. Along with its support for the war and the military destruction of the LTTE, the party backs Rajapakse’s muzzling of the media and anti-democratic measures such as detention without trial. Under the banner of “Motherland first and other things second”, the JVP has opposed any struggle to defend living standards and democratic rights that would interfere with the war effort.

On the campuses, JVP leaders have dumped their previous anti-imperialist demagoguery and remained silent on the criminal US occupation of Iraq. Like their elders in parliament, who hold private talks with US embassy officials, the student leaders tacitly back the US war in Iraq as long as Washington supports the Sri Lankan government’s bogus “war on terror”. In a bid to gain credibility, the JVP has conducted a duplicitous campaign to “oppose” cuts to public education, while fully backing the Rajapakse government’s huge increases in military spending.

Chinthaka and his gang of bullies are functioning directly as the political police on campus for the Rajapakse government. In a particularly ominous sign, the WSWs has been informed that the student union is trying to track down those Tamil students who bought ISSE literature to intimidate and threaten them, or worse. The ISSE and the SEP will not allow these threats to go unanswered. A political campaign will be launched against the JVP’s actions and to defend the right to a full and free exchange of ideas on the university campus.



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