

Sri Lankan police break up student protests over deteriorating university education

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Sri Lankan police mounted major operations to break up two student protests on July 30 and August 1 outside the offices of the ministry of higher education in Colombo. Water cannon, baton charges and tear gas were used to disperse hundreds of students demonstrating for better facilities and an end to the government's cutbacks to free education.

Three students were hospitalised as a result of police attacks on the first protest involving students from the Rajarata University. One student was detained and later released. Another two were hospitalised during clashes on the second day involving students from Aesthetic University. Doctors from the nearby National Hospital complained that the tear gas was so dense that their patients were being affected.

Higher Education Minister Wishva Warnapala met student union leaders and told them the government was not increasing, but cutting the budget allocation for universities by 20 percent this year. Chinthaka Sri Shantha, student union president at the Aesthetic University, told the *World Socialist Web Site* the minister had said that even with the 20 percent cut, the allocated funds could not be released because of the "economic difficulties of the government".

One major factor in these "economic difficulties" is the resumption of the communal war against Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) over the past 18 months. To pay the billions of rupees expended on military offensives, President Mahinda Rajapakse has slashed spending on essential services, including education at all levels. Confronting growing unrest, the government has not hesitated to employ police measures to silence dissent.

The student protests were organised by the Inter University Student Federation (IUSF), which is controlled by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

The IUSF, however, is not prepared to seriously challenge the Rajapakse government over its cutbacks to university education as the JVP not only supports the war, but demands its further intensification. The JVP's main slogan "Motherland first. Other things later" sums up its insistence that workers and students have to sacrifice for a reactionary war.

Student leader Chinthaka Sri Shantha refused to comment on the minister's declaration about economic difficulties. "The minister did not say much about this. Also we did not ask much about it," he told the WSW. The JVP student leaders accepted at face value the minister's empty promises to consider improving conditions and postponed any further protests to the indefinite future.

In other words, the protests were called not on the basis of a political program to oppose the government, but because the IUSF is under pressure from students and wanted to be seen doing something to defend public education. Having organised two rallies, the JVP student leaders have now shut down the campaign as it threatens to undermine Rajapakse's war plans.

The same process took place earlier this year when non-academic staff stopped work from April 27 to May 7 for higher wages. The university authorities, backed by the government, refused to make any concessions to the striking workers, declaring that it could not afford any pay increase. In addition, striking workers were subjected to unprecedented pay and holiday penalties. Those who objected were victimised. Rather than turning to students and other workers, the unions, including those controlled by the JVP, shut down the campaign.

To maintain its grip on university student unions, the JVP resorts to thuggery to intimidate and silence its political opponents. Last week, IUSF leaders at

Peradeniya University near Kandy threatened physical violence against members of the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) who had set up a bookstall on campus. ISSE members were campaigning against the US-led war on Iraq, the war in Sri Lanka and for a socialist perspective to defend democratic rights and living standards, including free education.

Students at the two universities engaged in the protests face similar problems. Rajarata University, located near Anuradhapura, north east of Colombo, is suffering from a severe lack of lecturers. In the faculty of management, for instance, only 22 of the 33 lecturer positions have been filled and none has a doctorate. The faculties of management, social science and humanities do not have separate buildings. The reading hall has places for only 20 students to study. There are no sports facilities.

Rajarata University was started in 1996 in vacant buildings constructed to celebrate a limited housing program. The facilities were not built properly and were unsuitable for a university. A burning problem is the lack of student hostel facilities. Only 782 students of the current student population of 2,204 have hostel accommodation. Others have to board in substandard housing with 6 to 8 students packed into a room.

At the Aesthetic University in Colombo—the country's only institution for the performing arts and fine arts—only 83 of the 154 lecturer posts are filled. Departments such as theatre history and applied music have ceased to function because of the lack of lectures. The department of Western music has only two of the 15 lecturers required.

Many departments suffer from lack of non-academic staff and inadequate infrastructure. There is no theatre hall, recording studio or computer lab. Students of visual arts lack basic equipment such as an air compressor, digital cameras and printers. With the exception of a few rented buildings, the university functions in the same buildings as it did in 1974. Only 320 of the 3,180 students have hostel accommodation on campus. The remainder are housed in rented accommodation up to 20 kilometres away.

Free university education, the product of the post-war struggles of the working class, has been steadily eroded since 1980 when the United National Party (UNP) government launched a restructuring program with the release of a White Paper. Its main provisions included

the establishment of private schools and private institutions able to grant degrees. Foreign universities charging high fees were able to establish branches for the sons and daughters of the wealthy.

Universities such as Rajarata were established in response to growing protests over the lack of university places, but failed to address the problem. Even with this limited expansion, less than 15 percent of eligible students are able to enter university. In 2006, for instance, about 115,000 students gained the necessary exam marks to enter university, but only 17,630 students gained places. The cutbacks being made under the Rajapakse government have made further inroads into public university education.



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