

Sri Lankan students protest against education privatisation

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More than 2,000 students from seven medical faculties in Sri Lanka held a protest in Colombo on May 7 against the establishment of two private medical colleges. Students chanted: “Stop selling education, Abolish private medical colleges.”

After a march, the Medical Faculty Students Action Committee (MFSAC) sought to hand a petition to the higher education minister, Vishva Warnapala, but he was “not available”.

South Asian Information Technology and Management (SAITM) is establishing one private college in collaboration with the Russian Nizhny Novgorod Medical Academy. Another college is being launched by St. Theresa Medical University (TMC), set up under the Institute of Technological Studies (ITS), which is affiliated to a British university. Both campuses will enrol students within a month.

The colleges have been started as projects under the Sri Lanka Board of Investment (BOI), a government facilitation service for private investors. SAITM students will pay 5.5 million rupees (\$US53,000) for a four-year course. TMC will charge \$10,000 per year plus VAT tax. The exorbitant fees indicate that the colleges will serve only the affluent.

Setting up these colleges marks a further attack on free public education. During the 1980s, the United National Party (UNP) government set up the North Colombo Medical College (NCMC). Because of continued protests by students and working people, the NCMC was brought under state control. Several later attempts to launch

private medical colleges failed due to opposition from students.

The approval of the private colleges exposes the bogus rhetoric of President Mahinda Rajapakse’s government about protecting free education. The government has used the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to suppress struggles by working people and students for the past three years. Although the medical students’ demonstration was not disrupted, the police have violently attacked previous student protests in Colombo, declaring that they posed “security threats” and “helped LTTE terrorists”.

The government has offered flimsy justifications for allowing private medical colleges. One is the inability of all qualified students to attend government universities due to the lack of facilities. More than 100,000 students qualified to enter universities in 2007, but only about 29 percent could enrol. Out of 15,718 students qualified for medical faculties, only 1,111 could commence.

In effect, the government is washing its hands of responsibility to provide education. The overwhelming majority of students are from poor families, so it is utterly false to claim that opening private universities will provide opportunities for students unable to enter government universities.

The government, which faces a dire foreign exchange crisis, is openly arguing that it can reverse currency reserve losses by stemming the number of students learning abroad. Speaking in a parliamentary debate in March on setting up an accountancy institution, Trade Minister Bandula Gunawardena stated: “We can save a big amount of foreign exchange through this concept (of private universities).”

There is agreement in the ruling elite on eliminating free education. Right-wing opposition UNP MP, Ravi Karunanayake, supported the minister's argument, noting that "private universities are essential to develop the country".

The establishment of private colleges is a step towards making education a profitable industry for investors, in line with the trends in every country. The IMF, World Bank and big business are continuously insisting that government spending be cut on free health and education.

Successive Sri Lankan governments have reduced education expenditure. In 1948, the allocation for education was just 2.9 percent of gross domestic product (GDP). Funding rose to nearly 4 percent for several years during the late 1950s and 1960s, but has declined for decades, and stood at just 2.9 percent again in 2009.

In 1984 there were 24,000 university students in eight universities. As a result of continuous agitation by students and parents, six more campuses were established over the past two decades and the student population has risen to around 75,000. But the facilities have not developed accordingly. There is a dearth of academic and non-academic staff, adequate laboratories, libraries, sound studios, computers and suitable buildings.

Spending on the war has far outstripped education funding. Allocations for the war this year hit 200 billion rupees, dwarfing the 47 billion rupees for public education as a whole.

Free education can be defended only through a political fight against the Rajapakse government's pro-capitalist policies, including its war, anti-Tamil communalism and attacks on public health services, living standards and democratic rights.

The organisers of the medical students' protest, the MFSAC and the Inter University Students Federation (IUSF) to which it is affiliated, are opposed to such a struggle. The IUSF is controlled by the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which has vehemently backed the government's war.

The petition handed over to the ministry by the MFSAC asked the government to halt the private universities, and

students were told that the privatisation policy could be changed by pressuring the government. During the past year, the IUSF organised several student protests along the same lines. These futile pleas to the government, which have been used to let off steam among students, and the IUSF's support for the government have increasingly discredited the IUSF among broader sections of students.

MFSAC convener Asanga Wickremasinghe told the WWSWS last week: "We want a government which recognises the free education as a principle.... We are protesting till such a government comes to power." He did not say which party's government would recognise that principle, leaving the way open to support any party that claims to defend free education.

The IUSF backed the JVP when it entered former president Chandrika Kumaratunga's government in 2004, taking three cabinet posts. In the 2005 presidential elections, the JVP and IUSF supported Rajapakse, saying he would protect free education. JVP trade unions and student groups then backed the government's war and sabotaged workers' and students' struggles, saying the priority was "defending the motherland".

Last year, the JVP withdrew direct support from the government because the party was becoming discredited, but remained a fervent advocate of the war, which the government has used to divide the working class.

Only the Socialist Equality Party and International Students for Social Equality advance a genuine socialist and internationalist perspective. Working people and youth can defend their basic rights, including free education, only through the broader struggle for a workers' and peasants' government that will abolish the profit system, which serves the interests of the rich few, and reorganise the economy along socialist lines to meet social need.



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