

# Sri Lanka: A phony debate on university privatisation

Panini Wijesiriwardane, Sujeewa Amaranath  
31 July 2009

The Sri Lankan Inter University Students Federation (IUSF), affiliated to the chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), held a public debate in Colombo earlier this month on the topic: “Private Universities: Are they good or bad?”

The issue of private universities has come to the fore after the government and the Board of Investment (BOI) gave the go ahead for two privately-owned, fee-paying medical faculties. The decision is a further inroad into public education and the creation of a two-class education system—private universities for the children of the wealthy and rundown public institutions for others.

The IUSF staged the debate on July 9 in order to posture as opponents of university privatisation and to contain the growing opposition among students and working people. However, as the debate demonstrated, the IUSF as well as the JVP have no answers precisely because it, like the proponents of privatisation, accept the framework of the profit system and confine any opposition to pressuring the government to change policy.

The first speaker in the debate was Navaratne Banda, a senior lecturer in the Geography Department at the University of Sri Jayawardenepura, who is frequently featured in the media as an ardent defender of private universities. His argument was straightforward: the present public university system failed to provide for all those wanting an education, therefore private universities should be allowed to fill the need. “In 2007, only 15 percent of those who were qualified for university entrance had the opportunity to find a place in state universities,” he pointed out.

Banda went on to attack the whole idea of free public education, insisting that “none of the governments in

the world can provide free education for all”. He dismissed “the demand for free education for all” as “a utopia”, concluding that “well-equipped and qualitative universities must be started for the education of those who can afford it”. Banda’s class bias was obvious. He stood not for the rights of students in general but only for the wealthy few who can pay for private education.

IUSF convener Udul Premaratne was the second speaker. The most significant aspect of his demagogic speech was that he failed to address the points raised by Banda. He began by attacking the “imperialist powers” for pressuring underdeveloped countries into following “incorrect policies”. He denounced the government for corruption, declaring: “Not only loss making but also profit making public enterprises are being privatised. Our rulers are masters of inefficiency, robbery and pillage.”

The major powers and institutions such as the IMF certainly press a pro-market agenda. The program of privatisation is not, however, confined to Sri Lanka or even to underdeveloped countries but has been a universal process in capitalist economies around the world for the past three decades. Declining profits have driven the global integration of productive process, with corporations and investors demanding the opening up of all areas of the economy to private profit—including education and health—while at the same time insisting that governments slash public spending to enable lower taxes and further business incentives.

Corruption, which is endemic to bourgeois politics, explains nothing. Far more significant than “corruption and inefficiency” are the massive defence budgets that President Mahinda Rajapakse and his government have allocated to prosecute their criminal communal war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)

and the island's Tamil minority as a whole. The JVP, however, backed the war to the hilt and voted in parliament to support budgets that squandered billions of rupees on the military while slashing spending on essential social services such as education.

Premaratne made clear his full support for the war, denouncing foreign powers for their very muted criticisms of the government's war crimes and human rights abuses. He condemned Norway for brokering a ceasefire with the LTTE in 2002 and all attempts to reach a deal with LTTE on the basis of provincial autonomy for the North and East of the island. The JVP's demands for a return to war were a major reason for its public backing of Rajapakse in the 2005 presidential election—the man Premaratne now denounces as a “master of inefficiency, robbery and pillage”.

Premaratne's argument for public education was based on the same communal, nationalist politics. The purpose of private universities, he declared, was to “develop a social layer that does not think of the country, the mother land ... this would bring disaster to our national culture”. In other words, the IUSF and the JVP back public education, not as a means for providing high quality education for all, but as the means to disseminate their reactionary nationalist perspective. Significantly, in the period 1987-89, as the JVP was murdering political opponents and workers who refused to join their “patriotic” campaign, their slogan was “Motherland first, education after.”

At the end of his rambling speech, Premaratne had still not addressed the point raised by his debating opponent, Banda, that free, high quality education is a “utopia” that is impossible for any government in the world to provide. Within the framework of capitalism, that is certainly true. But that is precisely why the struggle to defend and extend public education has to be based on a socialist program that seeks to restructure society in Sri Lanka and internationally to provide for the basic social needs of all, not the profits of the privileged few.

When it was formed on the basis of Maoism, Guevarism and Sinhala chauvinism in the 1960s, the JVP still made demagogic references to the need for socialist policies. Four decades later, the party and its university front organisation are the mouthpieces for vile communal politics. Its occasional condemnations

of “imperialism” are simply to defend the interests of Sri Lankan capitalism and the national bourgeoisie. The JVP has quietly backed the criminal US war on terrorism, including the occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.

For more than a decade, the JVP has been part of the political establishment in Colombo. In 2004, it joined the Sri Lanka Freedom Party-led coalition, led by President Chandrika Kumaratunga in which Rajapakse was prime minister. Its ministers voted for the government's economic policies, which included privatisations and further pro-market “reforms”. The JVP still holds up China—a police-state regime ruling over the world's largest cheap labour platform for corporate investors—as the model that Sri Lanka should emulate.

While staging a phony debate with Banda, the IUSF was determined to prevent the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) from setting up a literature table or being heard. The attempt to silence the ISSE was no accident. The SEP and ISSE provide the only alternative to all the defenders of the profit system—Banda and Premaratne alike. Free high quality education is not a utopia but a basic right for all working people that can be realised only through the abolition of capitalism. It is precisely to the perspective of socialist internationalism that students should now turn.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**