

Union calls off protest by unemployed graduates in Sri Lanka

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The Unemployed Aesthetic Graduates Union (UAGU) shut down a 17-day protest by unemployed graduates from the University of Visual and Performing Arts (Aesthetic) last week. Around 1,000 graduates had held a march on August 3 from Maradana to Fort Railway Station in central Colombo where a vigil was established to demand jobs.

The graduates displayed considerable determination in supporting the protest. Some female graduates took part in the August 3 march with their young children. Between 10 and 20 protesters took turns to maintain the vigil, which at times was backed by several hundred people. The police obtained a court order to remove a temporary shelter, but the protestors continued their vigil in the open air, day and night.

However, the UAGU leaders met with Education Minister Susil Premajayantha and Deputy Finance Minister Ranjith Siyambalapitiya on August 20 and ended the protest, claiming the ministers had pledged to provide employment. In fact, the promise was only to recruit Aesthetic graduates as public school teachers in January following the budget allocation for 2010—conditional on the “availability of vacancies”.

The government’s pledge is worthless. The country already confronts a deep economic crisis, produced by years of massive military spending now compounded by the global recession. Under the terms of an International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan, President Mahinda Rajapakse has agreed to slash public spending. Inevitably, social spending and programs, including education, will bear the brunt. The government has made clear that there will be no cuts in military spending, even though the army defeated the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in May.

A significant role in shutting down the unemployed graduates’ protest was played by the National Freedom Front (NFF), a breakaway from the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). Speaking as the UAGU called off the vigil, NFF leader Wimal Weerawansa said: “We were supporting this protest behind the scenes and are happy about that. Graduates should not be in the streets anymore.”

The NFF, which is part of Rajapakse’s ruling coalition, clearly stepped in to contain growing unrest among unemployed graduates. Weerawansa and the NFF were never going to wage a political struggle against the government and its policies. The protest was part of its efforts to undermine the JVP’s Joint Union of Unemployed Graduates (JUUG).

While NFF and JVP are competing for influence among graduates, both parties are based on the same reactionary program. Like the JVP, the NFF is a strident supporter of the war and the military. Both parties previously voted for the government’s huge defence budgets and will do so again even if that means further deep inroads into the country’s already limited public services. Last year’s split in the JVP was based purely on tactical grounds—whether to join the government or remain in opposition.

In the 2005 presidential election, the JVP and JUUG publicly campaigned for Rajapakse, promoting the illusion among the unemployed that he would keep his promise to create 2.4 million jobs over six years. The only jobs he created for unemployed rural youth was as cannon fodder for the army in its communal war against the LTTE. In November 2007, his government used police to physically attack a JUUG protest of unemployed graduates in Colombo, injuring 11 protesters.

The situation facing unemployed graduates in Sri

Lanka is worsening. At the Aesthetic University, the lack of basic facilities means that many students have to delay their enrollment and studies for years. Most of the protesters completed their studies five to three years ago and are now in their mid-30s. According to the UAGU, there are nearly 1,200 unemployed Aesthetic graduates despite the fact that more than 4,000 schools around the island lack teachers in the visual and performing arts.

Unemployment among graduates has jumped to more than 25,000. According to a 2008 Labour Ministry survey, the average employment rate for graduates one year after completing their studies was 38.74 percent. Overall unemployment for those between the ages of 19 and 29 is more than 25 percent.

Despite attempts by UAGU leaders to block the WSWS, our reporters spoke to a number of the protesters.

A graduate from the northwestern Kurunegala district said: “I feel like my whole life has collapsed. I am in a helpless position.” She passed her university entrance in 1996 but had to wait until 2001 to enter Aesthetic University. By then, she was married and had a young baby. “As a woman, I can’t spend years without being married. I stayed with my parents in a boarding house in Colombo, paying 3,500 rupees [\$US30] per month for our room. My husband works as a container driver in Saudi Arabia. He isn’t paid much. My sister and I still depend on our parents.”

The Aesthetic University graduate had worked as a volunteer teacher in a village school for nine months. “I went to meet a local politician to get a job because of the hardship. But he declared: ‘Why did you study music? There are no jobs for aesthetic subjects now.’ I want to know what use our university is. I have no faith in these political parties. I didn’t vote for any of them. The government has won the war but there is no relief for the people. If you look around the world it shows the crisis of present system. Our problem is also bound up with that.”

A music graduate from same district said: “We have no facilities in our area for practicing music. I went to the Katunayaka Free Trade Zone to find a job, but failed because of my age. Unemployment is developing all over the world, but the ruling class is doing nothing to resolve the problem. They protect their system by suppressing working people like us. The government

has received a loan from the IMF. As I understand it, the government is concerned about money but not for people who were displaced by the war or for creating new jobs.”

The government’s contempt for unemployed graduates was underlined last week by Higher Education Minister Vishwa Warnapala. Speaking after the vigil was ended, he declared: “Nowhere else in the world is it expected that every graduate must be employed in the state sector. It’s only in Sri Lanka that the government is expected to give every graduate a job... If I were the minister I wouldn’t give these aesthetic teachers jobs just because they launched a protest.”



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