

# Sri Lankan students protest against police over university death

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Thousands of university students have taken part in protests for the past three days over the death of Susantha Aruna Bandara, a third-year student at Ruhuna university in southern Sri Lanka. Bandara died last Friday, one month after a police attack on a student demonstration at Ruhuna university.

On Monday, students held demonstrations at Peradeniya, Sabaragamuwa, Kelaniya, Rajarata, Ruhuna and Visual and Performing Arts universities demanding the arrest of the police officers responsible for Bandara's death. Yesterday more than 2,000 students protested over the same issue in central Colombo. Thousands of soldiers and police, including the riot squad, were mobilised to prevent students from marching toward the police headquarters.

Bandara was an activist of the Inter-University Student Federation (IUSF) controlled by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). While these two organisations have seized on his tragic death to posture as defenders of students' rights, the IUSF helped to create the pretext for the police attack by its own resort to violence against its rivals.

On June 16, the IUSF was preparing to commemorate its so-called heroes when a group of its supporters at Ruhuna university was attacked by a gang of pro-government thugs. Violent clashes have taken place between opposition and pro-government student groups in the past. The JVP and the IUSF are notorious for the use of thuggery against their opponents.

The IUSF's festival was to commemorate the deaths of student activists by security forces in the late 1980s. In that period, JVP death squads killed hundreds of workers, trade unions and political opponents who refused to back its chauvinist campaign against the Indo-Lankan Accord. After initially collaborating with the JVP, the United National Party government launched a wave of killings in which

60,000 rural youth, including JVP members, were slaughtered.

Following the attack on the IUSF group, the student union organised an occupation of the university on June 17 to call for protection. It cited series of incidents, inside and outside the university, and the harassment of students. The authorities responded by closing down the university the next day and calling on the police to evict the student occupiers.

The police mobilised about 200 officers to end the occupation. After the students agreed to vacate the buildings, the police took some of them to their hostel by bus. When they arrived at the hostel, the police suddenly blocked the gates and turned on the students. Bandara was among those who were badly beaten, his colleagues told the WSW.

Bandara returned to his home in the remote village of Unavatuwa but the following day began to vomit and developed a fever. His mother took him to the nearby Buttala hospital then to Diyatalawa hospital. He was finally transferred to the main hospital for the area in Badulla, where he died last week.

The police have denied any responsibility but their contradictory statements point to a blatant cover up. At a press conference last Friday, the Inspector General of Police (IGP), Mahinda Balasuriya, said the Judicial Medical Officer's report ascertained the cause for death as internal haemorrhaging due to an abnormality in a blood vessel. He added that the JMO report had declared that there was no evidence of an attack.

On the same day, Neil Daluwatte, the Deputy Inspector General for Matara, declared that the police had nothing to do with Bandara's death. He offered a different explanation, saying Bandara had been bashed by a student from a rival group. The following day, IGP Balasuriya changed his tune,

declaring that “a student named Basnayaka has hit Bandara’s head”. The police are now hunting for Basnayaka.

The government is clearly concerned about the prospect of widespread student unrest. President Mahinda Rajapakse called for a report from the police and university authorities. There was a heavy police presence—mostly in plain clothes—at Bandara’s funeral over the weekend, with the aim of preventing any expression of political opposition.

Rajapakse is worried that Bandara’s death will become the focus of wider opposition among students to the government’s rundown of university education. Students already face poor studying and living conditions, including crowded lectures and dilapidated facilities. This situation will only worsen as the government cuts education spending and encourages private universities as part of the austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund.

The government had prepared for the police attack at Ruhuna university by reviving draconian legislation against “ragging” and other forms of violence in educational institutions. Under the law, the university authorities have sweeping powers to ban student political activities, including protests and occupations, and to call police onto campuses.

The IUSF provided the pretext for the legislation through its regular “ragging”—that is, initiation practices designed to humiliate and intimidate new students. The IUSF has relied on such backwardness to build up its own gangs of followers which it has used to harass and attack other student organisations, including the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE). In doing so, the IUSF has opened the door for the broader political repression against university students as a whole. Authorities at the Colombo University, for instance, have abolished the student union, citing violent clashes between the JVP and rival factions.

Addressing yesterday’s protest in Colombo, IUSF convener Udul Premaratna tried to paint his organisation as fighting for democracy. He condemned the government’s “anti-democratic crusade,” saying that it had not hesitated to use the same methods in the south that were used in the north. The emptiness of this posturing is underlined by the fact that the JVP and IUSF fully backed all of Rajapakse’s anti-democratic measures in his war across the north against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

During the war, which ended with the LTTE’s defeat last year, the IUSF insisted that students had to sacrifice under

the slogan, “the motherland first”. Premaratna accused the police, “who saved the motherland,” of carrying out the government’s dirty work. He declared that Rajapakse was on the path “towards dictatorship,” yet the IUSF’s campaign is aimed at pressuring the government for concessions.

Students should recall that the JVP actively campaigned for Rajapakse during the 2005 presidential election and pressed him to restart the war against the LTTE. During the presidential election this January, the JVP backed former army commander General Sarath Fonseka as the joint opposition candidate and is currently in a formal alliance with him. Fonseka made clear in the course of the campaign that he would be just as ruthless as Rajapakse in implementing the pro-market agenda that has been so damaging to public education.

The ISSE fully supports the struggles of students to defend their rights against the blatant police-state measures of the Rajapakse government. But they cannot do so under the banner of the IUSF, which shackles them to right-wing defenders of capitalism such as Fonseka. Nor can they do so alone: students must turn to the working class and help to build an independent political movement against the Rajapakse government and the profit system, which is the source of the attacks on education.

The ISSE and the Socialist Equality Party call on students to join workers in fighting for a workers’ and farmers’ government to implement a socialist program to reorganise society to provide for the needs of the majority, not the profits of the wealthy few. Billions of rupees must be provided to ensure that all young people have access to free, high-quality education.

The elementary precondition for uniting workers for such a struggle is the rejection of all forms of nationalism and chauvinism, including the Sinhala supremacism of the JVP and IUSF. The ISSE fights for a Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and Eelam as part of the struggle for socialist internationalism in South Asia and internationally. We urge students to join us in this struggle.



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