

Sri Lanka: Fight against university privatisation

Statement International Students for Social Equality
2 November 2010

The International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) calls on students to oppose the Sri Lankan government's plans to introduce a new higher education act this month to pave the way for private universities. The new laws will further erode the access of young people to tertiary education and worsen the conditions facing students in the country's public universities.

The preparation for the legislation has been accompanied by a vicious crackdown in recent weeks on students opposed to privatisation. In all, 30 students have been arrested across the Peradeniya, Ruhunu, Rajarata and Jayewardenepura universities on a variety of charges under legislation revived by university authorities in April to block political activity on campuses. Another 200 students have been suspended. Last Friday, police detained Udul Premaratna, convenor of the Inter-University Student Federation (IUSF), which organised the protests.

Notwithstanding the ISSE's implacable opposition to the IUSF's communal politics, the ISSE demands the immediate release of the arrested students and the dropping of all charges against them. The IUSF, which is linked to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), is notorious on campuses for thuggery against their political opponents, providing the government with a pretext for repressive measures. The arrests, however, are broadly aimed at intimidating students, stifling political activity and suppressing any opposition to the privatisation moves.

The new legislation, which has not been made public, is to change the 1978 University Act, which makes no provision for private universities. A previous attempt in 1980 to establish a private institution—the North Colombo Medical College—faced opposition from university students and staff, and questions were raised about the validity of its degrees. The college was later brought under the umbrella of Kelaniya University.

Higher Education Minister S.B. Dissanayake has made clear that the new law will open the floodgates for private universities. Addressing the Sri Lanka-Australia-New Zealand Business Council on October 19, he said discussions are

already underway with 15 foreign universities to set up private facilities, including Australia's Monash University and China's Beijing State University.

Higher Education Secretary Sunil Navaratne told the meeting that his department and the Board of Investment would provide a "one-stop-shop" for international universities. They will not be subject to controls on student fees and will be offered free land and tax concessions.

Attempting to justify the legislation, Dissanayake told the media that the government was seeking the involvement of foreign universities because it would take 10 years to improve the existing 15 state-owned universities. The comment is a tacit admission that the government intends to let public university education languish. The result will be a two-class university system: underfunded, crowded institutions for the majority of students, and private universities for those that can afford to pay.

Government expenditure on education fell from 2.67 percent of GDP in 2006 to 2.08 percent in 2009 as President Mahinda Rajapakse boosted military spending for his communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Under pressure from the International Monetary Fund, the government is preparing new spending cuts in this month's budget.

University students are already facing atrocious conditions, including crowded lecture halls, and a lack of staff, laboratories, adequate libraries and other facilities. At the University of Kelaniya, for instance, the library has 800 spaces for a student population of 8,200. There are not enough hostels, forcing most students into private accommodation. Many students live in poverty on their means-tested allowance of 2,500 rupees (\$US22) a month.

Dissanayake's claim that thousands of students currently unable to enter university will benefit from the private institutions is a lie. The fees will place the private universities out of the reach of the vast majority of young people. The

minister is hoping to negotiate free entrance for a percentage of students but even that is uncertain. The government's overriding aim is to encourage foreign investment by turning Sri Lanka into the "knowledge hub of Asia".

Well aware of broad opposition among students, the government is preparing to use the police-state measures that were built up during the war against the LTTE. Using the alleged violence of the IUSF in clashes with police, Rajapakse is preparing for the brutal suppression of all student resistance.

On October 26, the president summoned university vice chancellors for a meeting to deal with student opposition to privatisation. "About two thousand politically-motivated students are attempting to upset the education of over 80,000 university students and those unruly students will be dealt with the law prevailing in the country," he warned.

Higher Education Secretary Navaratne indicated the thrust of Rajapakse's comments, telling the media: "[T]he decree of the government prevails there [in the universities] like they [the security forces] did in Kilinochchi [the LTTE's administrative centre] in the past by defeating terrorism."

Underscoring the threat to use the military against students, Higher Education Minister Dissanayake in an interview with *Lakbima* newspaper recalled how the Chinese regime responded to mass protests by students and workers in Tiananmen Square in 1989. The government would not hesitate to expel two or three thousand students to "defend the country's university system," he said.

University students cannot defend public education alone but must turn to the working class, which is also confronting serious attacks on jobs, conditions and essential services as the government implements the IMF's agenda of pro-market restructuring. Above all, this involves a political fight to build an independent movement of workers and youth against the Rajapakse government on the basis of socialist policies.

Despite their occasional socialistic rhetoric, the IUSF and the JVP are bitterly hostile to such a struggle. While the IUSF promotes the fatal illusion that student protests can pressure the government to withdraw its plans, the JVP is proposing an opposition bloc with the right-wing United National Party (UNP) through the establishment of a "national centre to defend free education". The UNP, an open party of big business, was responsible for initiating the attacks on free public education after it came to power in 1977 and launched its open economy agenda.

The JVP is already backing away from supporting student protests. Amid the vilification of the IUSF by the government

and in the media, JVP parliamentarian Anura Kumara Dissanayake told a press conference last week that his party did not approve every action by students. He added that the JVP had "considered approving the setting up of private universities but cannot approve it because of the sorry state the poor people would face".

This concern about "poor people" is empty posturing. In 2004, the JVP held ministerial posts in the government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga, which implemented a further round of restructuring and privatisation. In 2005, the JVP backed Rajapakse in the presidential election and supported his renewed war against the LTTE to the hilt. Throughout the fighting which ended with the LTTE's defeat in May 2009, the IUSF and JVP argued that everything, including education, had to be sacrificed to the war effort.

The starting point of any political fight to defend public education is a complete break with all parties of the capitalist class, including the JVP and its student organisation. The attacks on education are part of a far wider onslaught in Sri Lanka and internationally on the living standards of working people. In Europe, the US and around the world, governments are attempting to impose the burdens of the global economic crisis onto workers and youth. The struggle for free education by students is completely bound up with building an independent movement of the working class in Sri Lanka and internationally against the profit system.

Billions of rupees needed to upgrade universities to provide free, high quality education for all youth who want it. That will only take place in the fight for a workers' and farmers' government based on socialist policies to refashion society to meet the pressing social needs of the majority, not the profits of a wealthy few. That is the program of the ISSE and the Socialist Equality Party. We urge students to join this struggle by building the ISSE on campuses throughout the island.



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