

Sri Lankan minister warns of “insurgency” in universities

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Sri Lankan cabinet spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella declared at a press briefing on November 4 that the country’s intelligence services were “aware of another insurgency to be launched soon using university students” and were “gathering information” on it.

Rambukwella’s remarks came amid a government crackdown on university students across the country, aimed at suppressing opposition to its planned privatisation of university education. Higher education minister S. B. Dissanayake has indicated that a new University Act will be presented to parliament this month to allow the establishment of foreign private universities in Sri Lanka for the first time.

The government’s reference to an “insurgency”—without providing the slightest evidence—is a warning to students of the police-state methods that will be used against any opposition. In the course of the civil war that ended with the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) last year, arbitrary detention without trial, torture and extra-judicial killings by death squads associated with the military were used against LTTE “suspects” and political opponents.

President Mahinda Rajapakse summoned university vice chancellors on October 26 and instructed them to “discipline” students. The president claimed that “about two thousand politically motivated students” were sabotaging the studies of 80,000 other students. He warned that students would face “the law prevailing in the country”.

Already police have arrested at least 33 students since

September, including 25 last month. University authorities have suspended 220 students, mainly for engaging in protest actions. Twenty five students were bailed out by courts in Colombo and Kandy this week, but judges warned them not to be involved in politics.

To spy on university students, the police have set up CCTV cameras on at least the Colombo and Jayawardenapura university campuses. Similar cameras have been deployed in Colombo city to curb “disturbances”—that is, unrest among workers and youth.

In his comments, Rambukwella declared that the government would crush the so-called insurgency. “Sri Lanka experienced three insurgencies, one in 1971, another in 1989 and the LTTE terrorism, which dragged the country into a 30-year-long war. There will be no room for another insurgency or terrorism.”

Rambukwella’s references to 1971 and 1989 are targeted against the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and its student organisation, the Inter University Student Federation (IUSF), which has been prominent in the student anti-privatisation protests. The JVP was formed in the 1960s based on a mixture of Sinhala populism, Maoism and Guevarism. In April 1971, it misled a section of Sinhala rural youth in an armed revolt that was ruthlessly suppressed by a coalition government led by Rajapakse’s Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). At least 15,000 young people were slaughtered by the security forces.

In 1988-1990, the JVP launched a jingoistic campaign against the Indo-Lanka Accord, which provided for the deployment of Indian “peacekeeping”

troops in the North and East. JVP gunmen killed hundreds of workers, trade unionists and political opponents who refused to join its reactionary patriotic crusade. After initially considering a coalition with the JVP, the United National Party (UNP) government turned on the JVP, murdering its leaders and carrying out a massacre of at least 60,000 rural youth.

By raising the spectre of another JVP “insurgency”, the government is preparing in advance the justification, if need be, for another slaughter. Speaking to the *Sunday Times*, Higher Education Minister Dissanayake declared that the JVP and IUSF were “jointly conducting training camps where university students are being trained in terror tactics”. He added: “Most of the students who have been suspended for causing troubles belong to this group ... The national intelligence bureau is on the job of locating the other members of this group.”

The JVP has long ago dropped its guerrillaism and integrated itself into the Colombo parliamentary political establishment. During the 2005 presidential election, the JVP backed Rajapakse and campaigned for his election. While now in opposition, the JVP has already hinted that it has no objection in principle to university privatisation and has distanced itself somewhat from the IUSF, which is notorious on campuses for its thuggery against political opponents.

The government’s chief target is not the JVP and IUSF. Rather it is exploiting the IUSF’s record of political violence to prepare for and justify its own violence against any attempt by students as a whole to defend public university education. The same methods will be used against working people as they come forward to defend their jobs and living standards against the austerity measures being prepared.

The Rajapakse government has launched an “economic war” to impose the burden of the economic crisis on the working people. Its 2010 budget, due to be presented on November 22, will cut spending on health, education and other social programs to meet the demands of the International Monetary Fund for “forceful action” to slash the budget deficit. The government is also concerned about developing

protests and restiveness among workers over declining real wages and living conditions.

Under the state of emergency, which is still in place 18 months after the LTTE’s defeat, President Rajapakse has sweeping powers, including to outlaw strikes and protests, censor the media, and detain individuals without trial.

In order to defend public education, and their basic democratic rights, students must turn to the working class. This means fighting to build a politically-independent movement of the working people in the struggle for socialist policies and a workers’ and farmers’ government. This is the perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Students for Social Equality (ISSE), as part of the struggle for a Union of Socialist Republics of South Asia and international socialism.



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