

Suicide of Philippine college student sparks protests

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The suicide of a first-year University of the Philippines-Manila (UPM) student, Kristel Tejada, sparked protests in the nation's capital by hundreds of students last week. The demonstrations spread to other regions amid anger over the actions of university officials and government policies, including increased fees, which have placed huge burdens on students, especially those from poor families.

On March 15, Kristel Tejada was found unconscious by her mother in their home after ingesting a lethal dose of silver polishing fluid. She was rushed to the hospital where she was pronounced dead on arrival. Two days before her death, the 16-year-old Behavioral Sciences student was forced to file a Forced Leave of Absence (FLOA) with the university for failing to pay her second semester tuition.

The eldest of four siblings, Tejada considered it her duty to graduate from university, find employment, and lend financial support to her family. Her dismissal from school was shattering. This was reflected in her suicide note, in which she despaired: "I just could not take it anymore. I hope that they will forgive me and pray for me."

The difficulties that faced Kristel Tejada are common for millions of working class youth. The Tejada family was thrown into poverty in 2009 after Kristel's father Christopher lost his job as a warehouse coordinator. Since then, he has been employed as a part-time taxi driver, while Kristel's mother Blesilda peddles t-shirts and takes care of their children. Despite selling their car and moving into a small apartment, the Tejada family found it increasingly difficult to pay for Kristel's education.

Her tuition was partially subsidized by the university. Tejada was assigned to the "D" bracket, reserved for those with an annual family income of 135,001 to

250,000 pesos (\$3,300 to \$6,100). The decision to place Tejada in this bracket failed to take into account the precarious nature of her parents' employment.

After her suicide, the university went into damage control. UPM Chancellor Manuel Agulto shed crocodile tears during a press conference last Monday. Amid calls for his dismissal, he stated in reference to Tejada: "I would like to consider myself as a surrogate parent." He claimed that he had done everything possible to assist the student.

However, Blesilda Tejada explained that earlier in the year Agulto had spurned her appeals for a payment extension, coldly declaring that the family would "learn something from this experience."

The University of the Philippines is one of 110 government-owned State Universities and Colleges (SUC), among 1,741 post-secondary learning institutions. The rise in the number of higher learning institutions, from 412 in 1990 to 1,236 in 2009, is bound up with definite government policies, particularly the export of cheap skilled labor.

In nursing for instance, the number of students taking licensing exams skyrocketed from 9,000 in 2005 to 50,000 in 2009. Many students also obtain Engineering and Technology degrees to fulfil the demand for skilled technicians in places such as the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. Remittances from migrant workers, which totalled P856 billion (\$21 billion) in 2011, are now an essential prop for the flagging Philippine economy.

Universities and colleges are also geared to the country's large and expanding call-center industry. Tens of thousands of students enrol in Business Administration studies, only to graduate and work at local call centers—a new form of sweatshop labor.

The prestige of the University of the Philippines (UP) and the prospect of a subsidized education make it a

coveted institution for working class youth like Kristel Tejada. But the government subsidies are inadequate to cover the rising fees as the Aquino administration slashes social spending to meet the demands of big business to cut budget deficits and public debt.

The Socialized Tuition Fee Assistance Program (STFAP), which counted Tejada among its beneficiaries, was introduced in 1989 by the administration of the late former president Corazon Aquino. It was launched under the pretext of eliminating “unintended subsidies” for financially independent students. In reality, it has provided the means by which successive governments have offloaded the operating costs of post-secondary institutions onto the students themselves. Before the STFAP, the average tuition in UP was 14 pesos per unit. By 2007, it had jumped to 1,000 pesos per unit. A report from the UP Office of Scholarships and Student Services cites that only 1 in 100 students now receive free tuition.

President Benigno Aquino, Corazon Aquino’s son, has laid out a 2013 national budget that earmarks just 37.1 billion pesos (\$880 million) for state colleges and universities. This covers only 68 percent of current operational costs. The Department of Budget and Management (DBM) expects these institutions to increase their income by almost P1 billion (\$24.5 million), primarily through tuition fee increases.

Kristel Tejada was crushed by this drive. The suicide of a 16-year-old girl, who managed to get into the country’s premier public university and was thrown out because she could not pay to be there, is another tragic expression of the destruction of an entire generation of youth in the Philippines and around the globe.

The so-called Philippine “left”, who were involved in the protests over Tejada’s death, have covered up the Aquino administration’s political responsibility for the plight of young people. The chief focus of the protest leaders has been to demand the removal of the university officials. Insofar as they refer to Aquino at all, it has been to make futile appeals for concessions from his administration.

Akbayan, a breakaway group from the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), is in a political alliance with President Aquino’s Liberal Party and functions entirely as the administration’s mouthpiece and political defender. In response to

Kristel Tejada’s suicide, they called on youth to “Honor her. Finish your studies.”

Bayan Muna, an umbrella front organization of the CPP, called a week-long series of “black protests”, highlighted by classroom walkouts and alternating days of wearing white and black t-shirts, demanding the resignation of UPM’s chancellor and vice-chancellor. This is simply to deflect attention from the Aquino administration—as if replacing UP Manila’s chancellor would stem the government’s deep inroads into public education.

Any genuine struggle to defend public education involves a political fight against the Aquino administration and all its “left” apologists and defenders. Above all, it means a turn to the working class and a struggle for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement socialist policies, including universal free public education at all levels and of the highest caliber.



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