

Sri Lankan military training against mock student protest

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A photo story was published earlier this month on the Sri Lankan army web site depicting a training exercise in which troops and police suppressed a student demonstration.

The exercise was held at the Security Forces Head Quarters in Vanni, in the war ravaged north, and led by Major General Boniface Perera who commanded battalions in Sri Lanka's civil war. Several other army generals also participated, together with "a large group of police personnel." The army report on the operation said it featured "a mock demonstration, related to control of mobs in an emergency situation." It added: "Riot control is an internal security measure launched to quell sudden uprising and protests using minimum force."

Accompanying photos showed troops and police officers dressed as university students and carrying placards against education cuts. One sign featured the demand, "We want free education." Troops with assault rifles and riot police armed with batons and transparent shields then moved in to disperse and arrest the "protestors."

The army released the photographs of the exercise to the media, clearly hoping to send the widest threat to workers and young people throughout the country—any anti-government protests or social unrest will be met by violent military crackdowns.

The military exercise points to the behind the scenes preparation of the armed forces and security apparatus to suppress any attempt by workers and youth to defend their interests against the assault on living standards by President Mahinda Rajapakse and his government.

There have already been violent clashes. In 2011, police attacked tens of thousands of workers in the Katunayaka Free Trade Zone, killing one of them, in response to demonstrations. In 2012, police shot dead a fisherman in Chilaw as he participated in a protest against fuel price increases.

Last August, an army battalion deployed by the government shot dead three young people and injured more than 30 villagers at Weliveriya who were protesting against a large company that polluted water supplies in the area.

The focus of the army exercise on students is particularly menacing. University students have agitated in recent years against the government's attacks on public education, with police repeatedly deployed to brutally suppress protests.

It is also significant that the exercise was held in the military-occupied north, where in recent months workers have participated in struggles of railway, electricity, and health employees throughout Sri Lanka.

Other protests are emerging. Last week, thousands of people at Wanathamulla in Colombo came onto the streets demanding the return of Samaradheera Sunil, who was abducted by persons believed to be security personnel. Wanathamulla residents have previously clashed with the government over eviction orders given to about 5,000 families.

Samaradheera was abducted to intimidate people, but this backfired. In the politically charged situation, the abductors had to release their captive several kilometres away. Residents in the area chased away a parliamentarian from the ruling coalition and a close associate of President Rajapakse, Duminda Silva, who had attempted to pacify angry residents.

The Sri Lankan ruling elite is preparing for much wider eruptions of the working class. Last month, police bought 10 trucks fitted with water cannons and tear gas launchers, tripling the size of its fleet. In major cities and in several universities, CCTV cameras have been installed to capture scenes of protesters.

During the government's communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) warned that the same brutal

methods employed against the Tamil minority would be turned against workers and youth throughout the country. This is being borne out by recent events.

During the 26-year war, successive Sri Lankan governments built up the military. In 1983 when the war began, there were 15,000 troops, while by 2005 there were 200,000. Despite the military defeat of the LTTE, the number has further increased, to 367,000, and military expenditure has likewise grown. Some estimates indicate that more than 100,000 troops remain deployed in occupied Northern Province and in other areas.

The military is now widely engaged in economic activities. In the north, it cultivates land that formerly belonged to Tamil civilians. It is also running some tourist hotels in the area. In the south, the military has been employed in the construction industry, taking government allocated funds for infrastructure projects.

The Bonn International Centre for Conversion, a German research institute, last year published a Global Militarisation Index that concluded that Sri Lanka was the most militarised country in South Asia. The country was ranked 36, ahead of Pakistan at 47, Afghanistan at 58, and India at 74.

The entire political establishment in Colombo is complicit in the country's militarisation. The UNP, the major right-wing opposition party, took the lead when it was in office in building up the military and waging the war against the LTTE. The party is now issuing bogus appeals about the government's violations of democratic rights. At the same time, the pseudo-left outfits, the Nava Sama Samaja Party and United Socialist Party, are in alliance with the UNP, painting its leader Ranil Wickremesinghe as a liberal democrat.

Only the Socialist Equality Party has consistently fought for a socialist and internationalist program to mobilise the working class in defence of democratic rights and living conditions. We urge workers and youth to support our campaign for the Colombo district in the Western Provincial Council election.



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