

# Sri Lankan students' union promotes illusions in protest campaign

IYSSE reporters  
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Around 2,000 university students rallied in Colombo last Tuesday against the Sri Lankan government's wide-ranging attacks on education and other democratic rights.

Organised by the Inter University Students Federation (IUSF), the protest followed a more than 170-day sit-in and lecture boycott by Allied Health Science (AHS) degree students at Peradeniya and other universities against moves to cut the course from four years to three. Demonstrations involving thousands of students have also been held in Colombo and other nearby cities in recent months against the establishment of private universities and the suspension or abolition of the studentships of hundreds of students.

The IUSF, which is controlled by the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), a breakaway faction of the Sinhala-chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), held last Tuesday's rally not to take forward the fight against the government's privatisation program and education cuts. Rather it was held as an empty piece of political theatre, right at the point when the IUSF plans to shut down the campaign.

Promoted as a "Student-People Lineup" (*Sisu-Jana Pelagesma*), the event denounced the education cuts and also called for an end to government abductions and repression, and for the restoration of fishermen's subsidies. Its central purpose, however, was to promote claims that an alliance between the IUSF and various pseudo-left controlled unions can pressure President Mahinda Rajapakse's government to drop its capitalist "free market" policies.

The FSP, whose main base is among university students, is currently attempting to regroup with pseudo-left parties, such as the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and United Socialist Party (USP), the unions and other bourgeois groups.

Along with NSSP-controlled unions, others participating in the rally included the Ceylon Teacher Service Union, which is affiliated to the JVP, the Ceylon Teachers' Union, and the Health Services Trade Union Federation (HSTUF). These unions are notorious for sabotaging workers' struggles for wages and improved conditions.

The IUSF is also seeking to counter the growing influence of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the youth organisation of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP). IYSSE members intervened in the meeting, distributing a leaflet explaining that the government's attacks are driven by international finance capital and that the defence of free education and other basic rights involves students turning to the working class, as part of the struggle for a workers' and peasants' government based on a socialist and internationalist program.

The protest was used by IUSF leaders to dissipate students' concerns about the decision to end the campaign. It consisted of union officials falsely glorifying the students' limited protest actions.

IUSF leader Sarath Silva told the meeting that the "root cause" of the attacks on education and social services was "neo-liberal capitalism." The use of the term "neo-liberal" is to promote the illusion that other policies—under capitalism—can reverse the attacks on education. In fact, governments around the world, of all political complexions, are pursuing the same austerity agenda.

Student protests, Silva declared, had "forced the government to step back, as shown in the victorious Allied Health students struggle." His "victory" claim was based on a recent decision by the University Grants Commission (UGC), following a directive from President Mahinda Rajapakse, to slightly modify its

plans to cut the length of the Allied Health Science degree.

This limited, but much-hailed, victory is likely to be very short-lived. Instead of cutting the degree by a year, the UGC will now use a 120-point credit system. The Peradeniya University AHS faculty dean told the WWS last week that the 120 credit points can be obtained in four years and students will get four years of learning. However, the new system could be used in the future to reduce the degree program as the UGC has said “it is the volume of learning not the time period” that is the basis for awarding the degree.

IUSF convenor Najith Indika told the rally said that while “other forces” were “worried always about how to confront the current situation,” the student movement had represented the future at every crucial moment in history. “[Higher Education Minister] S. B. Dissanayake said that the IUSF was at an end,” Indika said, but “our recent victories have shown it is the government’s agenda that has finished.”

In an indirect reference to the IYSSE, Indika said the IUSF had been criticised for limiting students’ struggles to sit-in protests but “we have proven that we can win through [student] struggles.”

NSSP-affiliated United Workers’ Federation president Linus Jayatilake, told the rally that the AHS students were “an example to the working people” because their actions had been “courageously carried out without bowing or surrendering to any suppression.” He hailed the IUSF’s Student-People Lineup, declaring it “a good example for other struggles.”

These claims are in line with the NSSP’s manoeuvres to bring the IUSF and students under the wing of Sri Lanka’s second bourgeois parliamentary party, the United National Party (UNP).

HSTUF leader Saman Ratanapriya attended Tuesday’s rally a few hours after high-level discussions with the UNP leader Ranil Wickeremesinghe. He demagogically declared that “a grave economic burden has been placed on the masses” by the Rajapakse government and that “democracy is being buried.”

The HSTUF leader failed to explain how it was possible to safeguard democracy by lining up with UNP, which is notorious for its attacks on the democratic rights and living standards of the working

class when in government. Others addressing the students included former Federation of University Teachers’ Associations (FUTA) president Nirmal Ranjith Devasiri, who led the betrayal of the three-month FUTA strike in 2012.

The real purpose of the meeting was to prevent student from turning to the working class as part of a unified political struggle against the Rajapakse government on the basis of a genuine socialist program. The IUSF and its pseudo-left allies are preparing a trap for students and working people with bogus claims that mass pressure will compel the government to drop its “free-market” policies. This is nothing more than an attempt to defend the profit system.

The IYSSE, along with SEP, is holding a public meeting in Colombo this week to discuss the socialist program required to defend education and defeat the government’s wide-ranging attacks on youth, workers and peasants.

The meeting will be held at the N. M. Perera Centre Hall, Borella, Colombo 8, on Thursday June 19 at 3.30 p.m. We urge students and workers to attend.



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