

Sri Lankan government intensifies attacks on students

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President Mahinda Rajapakse's government is stepping up its repressive measures against students in a bid to crush opposition to its erosion of free education and the privatisation of the university system.

In a new round of attacks, four students of Rajarata University in the north central province, including the university student union president, have been arrested and imprisoned. When produced before the Anuradhapura magistrate court on July 10, they were again remanded in prison. Another 21 students have been issued with arrest warrants and the police are hunting them.

Rajarata students had conducted a *sathyagraha* (sit-in-protest) for months over several demands, including the lifting of class suspensions on 23 students. They faced police repression and goon squad attacks several times during their protracted protest.

On June 26, students surrounded the university administration building. The student union lifted the siege, however, claiming to have obtained a written promise from the administration not to take disciplinary measures against the students who organised the action, to discuss mitigating the suspensions and not to close the university.

Nevertheless, the administration closed the university indefinitely from July 2. A police witch-hunt was unleashed against the students, charging that their siege of the administration building amounted to "hostage taking."

The 23 students had been suspended for participating in demonstrations against the privatisation of education and also "student heroes' day" celebrations, an annual event organised by the Inter University Students' Federation (IUSF).

The IUSF functions under the political control of the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), a breakaway group

from the Sinhala chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). It uses the "student heroes' day" to glorify its former leaders and activists killed by government forces or allied death squads, as a part of its attempts to divert students from the underlying political issues in their struggles against the education cuts.

In the past few weeks, students at Peradeniya, Kelaniya and Ruhunu universities have been also subjected to arrests, disciplinary inquiries, physical attacks and the closing of universities.

On June 19, a former IUSF convener and the presidents of the Peradeniya University Students Union and the Allied Health Science Faculty Student Union were taken into police custody on the charges of "threatening university security officials." On June 30, the Ruhunu University Students Union president was set upon by armed thugs on his way back to a university hostel with several other students and had to be hospitalised.

Disciplinary inquiries have also been launched against three female students at Kelaniya University for holding student meetings at a university hostel. To prevent students from organising, they are not allowed to use electricity and bathrooms after 9 pm in hostels. University premises have also been declared out of bounds for the former Kelaniya University Students Union president.

In effect, the Rajapakse government has banned all student political activities. During the past four years, more than a thousand university students have been suspended or stripped of their studentships. Numbers of student unions have been banned.

This repression is backed by the media. The *Island*, a right-wing daily, published two editorials—"Bring the hostage takers to justice" and "Hostage takers above

the law?” on June 30 and July 3. The July 3 editorial, branded Rajarata students as “thugs” who “committed a very serious criminal offence.” It declared: “Anyone who wants them forgiven and handled with kid gloves has no moral right to demand that the rule of law be restored.”

At the same time, the privatisation of education has been speeded up. Addressing a ceremony in Kandy on July 4, Higher Education Minister S. B. Dissanayake announced that 51 foreign universities had been allowed to start academic activities in Sri Lanka.

Students throughout the country have been involved in protests against privatisation and the lack of lecture halls, laboratories and even lecturers. Public education funding has been slashed as part of the government’s austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

There has also been an upsurge of struggles among working people. Workers in the power sector, railways and health have fought for various demands, including wage rises. Mass protests have erupted among the fishermen and peasants against the cuts in fuel and other essential subsidies.

Rajapakse’s government has responded with police and military repression. Increasingly, it is relying on police-state measures to suppress the popular resistance to its pro-business program.

The IUSF, which is utterly opposed to students turning to the working class in a political struggle against the government, has hailed temporary manoeuvres by the government or university administrations as “major victories.” The lifting of the suspensions of about 200 Jayewardenepura University students has been a recent example.

Such manoeuvres are designed to buy time to prepare further massive attacks on free education and students’ democratic rights. University Grants Commission chairperson Kshanika Hirimburegama recently announced that a special committee would be appointed to look into student radicalisation.

The IUSF has set up a new political trap for students by launching “Sisu Jana Pelagesma,” or Student-People Lineup, with several trade union bureaucrats who have notorious records of suppressing working class struggles against the government. Also involved are the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP) and United Socialist Party (USP), two pseudo-left groups that have lined up

with the right-wing opposition United National Party (UNP).

The purpose of this alliance is to block any political movement of the working class against the government and the capitalist profit system itself. The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the student and youth wing of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), is waging a political struggle for the mobilisation of students and workers on an international socialist program against the government and its assault on basic conditions, including free education, and fundamental democratic rights.



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