

General strike in northern Sri Lanka over police killing of students

Our correspondents
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Tamil people in northern Sri Lanka observed a general shutdown or “hartal” yesterday over the police killing of two Jaffna University students—Puwanraj Sulakshan from Chunnagam and Nadarajah Gajan from Kilinochchi—last Thursday night.

Government offices, schools, private businesses and shops were closed and all transport halted with thousands of people refusing to work across the island’s northern districts, including Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mullaithivu, Vavuniya and Mannar.

On Monday morning, more than 1,000 Tamil and Sinhala students, teachers and workers from Jaffna University demonstrated outside the provincial council office. University students in Colombo also protested against the police killing.

Puwanraj Sulakshan and Nadarajah Gajan, who were riding on a motorcycle after attending a social function, died on October 20 at around 11.30 p.m., after being shot at by police from the Kokuvil-Kulappidy junction checkpoint in Jaffna.

Police initially attempted to cover up their responsibility, insisting that the motorcycle accidentally hit a parapet wall after the driver ignored police demands to halt. Police also claimed the students were under the influence of alcohol at the time of the incident.

The Judicial Medical Officer’s (JMO) investigation, however, reported that there were bullets in Sulakshan’s body and that he died from police gunshots. His bike hit a wall, injuring Gajan who later died. The JMO said there was no evidence that the two students had consumed alcohol.

Yesterday’s hartal was called by various Tamil parties organised in the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and the Tamil United Liberation Front. These organisations have gone into high gear in an attempt to

dissipate the outrage by workers, the poor and young people over the student deaths.

Addressing the Sri Lankan parliament yesterday, opposition leader and TNA head R. Sambandan “condemned” the police action and called on the government to conduct an “impartial inquiry” and ensure that those responsible for the student deaths to be “brought to book.” Sambandan boasted that he had immediately contacted Sri Lankan President Sirisena and then thanked the government for “taking initial action in this regard.”

Northern Provincial Council Chief Minister C.V. Wigneswaran issued a similar statement, declaring that he expected a magistrate to conduct a proper investigation. He urged Tamil youth to be “patient in this tragic situation.”

These statements are utterly hypocritical and indicate the fear that all the Tamil bourgeois parties have, that growing opposition among Tamil workers and youth could erupt against these organisations, and the Sri Lankan government of President Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe.

Seven years after the end of Colombo’s war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the population in Sri Lanka’s north and east confront dire social conditions and ongoing occupation and de facto rule by the military. Under the bogus claims of curbing crime, the police are being used to suppress and intimidate residents.

In the south, the government is facing widespread opposition from workers as indicated by the recent strikes and protests by plantation workers and the ongoing agitation by university students against the privatisation of education.

The TNA is in the forefront of defending the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration, praising its bogus

claims of “good governance” and promoting its phony “inquiry,” which will attempt to find a few scapegoats for the police shooting and then bury the issue.

The Tamil parties, who fully supported the Washington-orchestrated regime-change operation to install Sirisena as Sri Lankan president, have no concern for the democratic and social rights of Tamil workers and youth. Their backing of Sri Lanka’s pro-US government is to gain economic privileges through the joint exploitation of the Tamil and Sinhalese workers and youth.

A leaflet issued by Jaffna Teachers Union echoed the TNA’s appeals for an “impartial investigation” and called for “international and national human rights bodies and activists” to supervise the inquiry.

The student union leaders declared that the demonstrations were not against the government but the police. “It is useless to be against the government in everything. This is a work of police.” They also opposed the distribution of Socialist Equality Party (SEP) leaflets condemning the student murders. The SEP has systematically defended the democratic rights of the Tamil people and opposed Colombo’s decades-long communal war against the LTTE.

Last Thursday’s killing of the two Jaffna University students was not a mistake or the arbitrary action of a few police officers but a continuation of the police-state methods developed during the war and that are now increasingly used against workers and the poor throughout the Sri Lanka.

In response to mass anger over the death of the students, five police officers on duty at the Jaffna checkpoint have been suspended, arrested and remanded until November 4. President Sirisena has promised compensation for the parents of the students.

Several people supporting yesterday’s protest spoke with WSWS reporters.

“We fully support this hartal. How long before our children are going to be killed. We want justice for this murder,” one resident said. “I don’t think that the police are the only ones responsible for this murder. This is a campaign and it can’t happen without the government creating the environment.

“Those who claim this government is carrying out ‘good governance’ are also responsible. The TNA is supporting the government because it wants to defend its own interests. It is not fighting against such actions

and gives silent support. Those who supported and brought Sirisena to government are responsible.”

A hotel worker referred to the widespread protests and clashes over the rape and murder of school girl Vidhya Sivalohanathan in May 2015. He said: “I was just watching the protest against murder of Vidhya when the police assaulted me and detained me for two weeks. I was finally released on 200,000 rupees [\$US1,400] bail but the case is still continuing. The TNA betrayed us and did not defend our rights.”

A university student commented: “The violence continues against the people because the anti-terror laws still prevail in this country and the police and military have powers. The war ended seven years ago but the military is still occupying the Northern Province and oppressing Tamil people and the students. The military must be withdrawn from here.”



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