

Lessons of protests against murder of Jaffna University students in Sri Lanka

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A month after the murder of two Tamil students belonging to the arts faculty, Jaffna University workers, the country-wide demonstrations of students and youth offer key political lessons. Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim students throughout the country jointly protested against the police murder.

On October 20, Sri Lankan police had opened fire at Pawnraj Sulakshan and Nadarasa Gajan, who were riding a motorcycle, causing a fatal accident. Bullets were found in the chest and head of one victim; the other succumbed to internal injuries.

Along with students from the Tamil-majority North and East provinces, students from ten universities in the predominantly Sinhala South protested the killing. They accused the government of the murders, demanding an end to the killing of students. Media and civil organisations protested at the Fort railway station in Colombo, together with hundreds of workers. Plantation workers protested in the central provinces.

These events vindicated the Socialist Equality Party's (SEP) opposition from the beginning to the installation of US-backed President Maithripala Sirisena's "good governance" regime. The killing of Pawnraj Sulakshan and Nadarasa Gajan was not a tragic accident. It flowed directly from the police-state conditions imposed by Sirisena and his Tamil National Alliance (TNA) allies against workers and youth in the Tamil-majority North of Sri Lanka.

The murder came amid mounting popular opposition after the September 24 demonstration against the Sirisena regime and the TNA, as the masses instinctively strive to unify themselves across ethnic lines. Tamil and Sinhala students jointly organised the protests in Jaffna, and Sinhala and Tamil students read the same statement against the police killings.

Instinctive feelings of solidarity will not suffice,

however, to oppose police-state measures and the attempts by the ruling class, seven years after the end of the Sri Lankan Civil War, to divide workers and youth along ethnic lines. There must be a fight to unify workers across ethnic lines in struggle against the TNA and the Colombo regime, and a ruthless fight against Tamil and Sinhala nationalism.

Students and their families are hostile to the TNA, whose leader R. Sampanthan met with Sirisena and proposed an "impartial inquiry" into the murder. Northern Province Education Minister Thambirajah Kurukularajah had to flee when he tried to speak at Gajan's funeral in a working class area of Kilinochchi, after students took his microphone and told journalists to leave.

The TNA replied through its flunkeys at *TamilNet*, who wrote that students "have come under criticism for denying space for grassroots-oriented Tamil politicians to take part in the processions and protests."

While students instinctively oppose the Tamil nationalists, the student organization leaders base themselves on Tamil nationalism and cover for the TNA, on the basis of reactionary calls for "no politics." They accepted the calls from Sirisena and the university administration to end the protests. The demands they presented while meeting with Sirisena were the same as Sampanthan's.

Their perspective was limited to asking President Maithiripala Sirisena to conduct an inquiry, punish the policemen involved, and compensate the bereaved families. The delegation of the pro-Sirisena Jaffna Student Union, led by Vice Chancellor Vasanthy Arasaratnam, met with Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, presenting the demands. She predicted, "Once the report of the magisterial inquiry is submitted, [the government] will take proper action to

ensure [students'] safety and expedite the legal process into the deaths of the two students.”

These demands, presented to Sirisena by his political allies, proved totally impotent. A month after the killings, nothing has emerged from the investigation, except loose assurances that the policemen involved had been arrested. In the meantime, the military-police occupation of the North has only intensified, with a spreading wave of arrests.

Fresh police forces, including Special Task Force (STF) and intelligence squads, have been dispatched under the pretext of investigating the murders. Several youth were arrested on charges of belonging to the “Ava Group” gang and of being former members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

In taking up a struggle against police brutality in the North of Sri Lanka, workers and youth, both Tamil and Sinhalese, are entering into conflict not only with the capitalist ruling elite in Sri Lanka, but with American and world imperialism. This struggle can only develop in conscious opposition to the Tamil nationalists and all factions of the Colombo regime. They represent layers of the venal Sri Lankan bourgeoisie tied to imperialism or the capitalist regime in China.

It is not only the bayonets of the Sri Lankan army that stand behind the TNA and the Sri Lankan police. Washington organized last year's regime change operation, ousting pro-Chinese President Mahinda Rajapakse and replacing him with Sirisena, as part of its “pivot to Asia” against China. It views the army-police deployment around Jaffna as key to keeping order in a strategic area it wants to control and hold against China in case of war.

The SEP alone opposed the regime-change operation based on its opposition to the imperialist war drive in Asia. In fact, Washington's pretense that Sirisena would bring “good governance” to Sri Lanka has been exploded in just two years. Sirisena and his right-wing prime minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, introduced IMF austerity and economic liberalisation measures, attacking workers and the poor. Budget proposals for 2017 in parliament show that new attacks are planned.

At the beginning of the year, Sirisena and Sampanthan promised to release political prisoners jailed for decades under the notorious Prevention of Terrorism Act. Only a handful have been released. Sampanthan cynically declared in a press conference

that he did not have the prison keys to release the remaining prisoners.

None of these problems can be resolved by representatives of the capitalist class. As anger mounts among the workers and youth, they are returning to the old tactics of divide and rule that produced decades of bloodshed and civil war in the island.

Rajapakse's “common opposition” is responding to the crisis of Sirisena's regime, which is heavily dependent on Chinese loans, to manipulate public anger by whipping up anti-Tamil communalism. Together with its allies, it is defending police and occupying armed forces in the North. Nishantha Sri Warnasinghe, the leader of the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), a Sinhala racist party, defended the police killings, claiming that “rehabilitated” ex-LTTE cadres are behind criminal activity. He called for a crackdown on all 12,000 former LTTE members in Sri Lanka.

For its part, *TamilNet* has slanderously attacked the entire Sinhala population as implicated in police murders in Jaffna. It quoted an unnamed “senior student leader” as saying, “This act has not only emboldened the Sinhala rulers in the island, but every Sinhala person carrying weapons in their hands while serving the interests of the genocidal State.”

The SEP and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), its student movement, have placed the struggle against war and communalism at the center of their work. We appeal to workers and youth to come forward, support, and build the SEP and the IYSSE in Jaffna and throughout Sri Lanka.



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