

Sri Lankan police attack protesting students

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Sri Lankan police violently assaulted university students occupying the health ministry on Wednesday and have now broadened the crackdown, arresting the protest leaders.

The government has also threatened to take action against the Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) and doctors who launched an “indefinite strike” to protest against the police attack and demand the government take over the South Asian Institute of Technology and Medicine (SAITM), a private medical college.

Thousands of students involved in Wednesday’s demonstration entered the health ministry building in Central Colombo, breaking police barriers and demanding a discussion with Health Minister Rajitha Senaratne. The Inter-University Student Federation (IUSF) leaders said they went into the building because they had been given no appointment to meet with Senaratne.

The demonstration was part of ongoing protests by students and GMOA members to demand that the government take control of SAITM, allocate 6 percent of gross domestic product for education, end school fees and resolve various problems in the health sector.

After students entered the health ministry, Law and Order Minister Sagala Ratnayake ordered the Special Task Force (STF) to clear the premises. The STF is a specially trained wing of the police and notorious for its brutal assaults on protestors.

Television channels broadcast footage showing hundreds of STF personnel wearing helmets severely beating students and stampeding them down the stairs. STF officers also baton-charged students staging a sit-down protest and used tear gas and water cannon to disperse the demonstration.

An IUSF activist told the media on Wednesday that over 90 students were being treated at the national hospital, about 20 of them female students, and some

were in a critical condition. Police said six officers were admitted to the hospital but later transferred to its own hospital, claiming that national hospital doctors were not treating them properly.

Justifying the police attack, Deputy Inspector General Priyantha Jayakody claimed the students violated a court order obtained by the police to prevent the protest. He accused students of damaging state property and said they would be taken into custody and brought before the courts.

Health Minister Senaratne said the students would be identified using CCTV records and any student alleged to have caused more than 25,000-rupees worth of damage would be denied bail. The students denied responsibility for any damage and accused the police of destroying property in order to frame-up students.

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe demanded a report on why the police were unable to stop the students entering the health ministry.

On Thursday the police took into custody Inter-University Bikkhu [Monks] Federation leader Tampitiye Sugathananda as he received hospital treatment. Yesterday, the Colombo Crimes Division arrested IUSF convenor Lahiru Weerasekera and another activist as they left a press conference. They were accused of damaging state property, brought before a magistrate and placed on remand.

GMOA members walked out on Thursday in protest against the police assault on the students and declared they would remain on strike until the government solved the SAITM issue. Health Minister Senaratne told a press briefing on Thursday the government was to ready go beyond previous measures and “take tough action” against the striking doctors.

Students and doctors are deeply opposed to the privatisation of education and the health services. They have been involved in protests over the past year. GMOA and IUSF members are concerned that proper

standards required for teaching medicine are being compromised by SAIMT.

However, the perspective of both organisations is politically bankrupt and aimed at promoting illusions that mass pressure will force the government to withdraw its cost-cutting policies.

On Thursday the IUSF held a press conference with various pseudo-left groups, including the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), which politically controls the IUSF. Others present were the Voice of the Left, a dissident faction in the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), the United Socialist Party (USP) and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). These organisations all advance nationalist and pro-capitalist policies.

IUSF convenor Weerasekera told the media that the groups in attendance represented the people. “All of us are saying that education and health are social rights and urge ‘don’t sell them.’ All of us told the president that the only solution is the abolition of SAIMT or its takeover by the state but no solution was given.”

Contrary to Weerasekera’s claims, the pseudo-left formations have come forward to assist the IUSF and GMOA to politically derail students and doctors. They are seeking to prevent the development of a unified movement of workers, students and youth fighting against the government and for a socialist and internationalist program. All of them, in one way or another, backed the election of Maithripala Sirisena as president, claiming he would defend democratic rights and improve the living standards of working people.

Addressing a public meeting in Polonnaruwa last week, Sirisena reiterated the government’s big business program. The students were not to blame for “conspiracies” against the government, he said, but had been influenced by “an uncivilised political climate in the universities.” Private universities were necessary, he declared, to cater for the thousands of students passing entrance exams.

Sirisena’s claims, which are virtually the same as those by former President Mahinda Rajapakse, underscore the diversionary nature of the appeals to the government by the IUSF and GMOA. Both are seeking solutions within the capitalist system. Though GMOA is demanding a government takeover of SAIMT, it supports the government’s overall privatisation program.

The Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government’s assault

on education, health and other vital social facilities is driven by the deepening crisis of the capitalist system and is part of a broader assault on the rights of workers and the poor in every country.

The Socialist Equality Party and the International Students for Social Equality insist that the only way to defeat the assault on public education and health is for students and doctors to turn to all sections of the working class, Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim alike, and fight for their mobilisation for a workers’ and peasants’ government to implement a socialist program.

This week’s brutal police attack on students and the escalating threats against striking doctors underline the necessity of this perspective.

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