

Oppose Sri Lanka's National Defence University Act! No privatisation of education!

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (Sri Lanka)
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The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (Sri Lanka) urges workers and students to oppose the John Kotelawala National Defence University (KDU) bill presented by Sri Lanka's defence minister to parliament. The legislation is a further move toward the privatisation of higher education and increased militarisation of the country.

The Kotelawala Defence Academy was established in 1981 to train recruits for the higher ranks of the three armed forces. It was elevated to university level in 1986 and started enrolling a limited number of civilian students after 2012 to fee-paying courses, including engineering, information technology and law.

The new bill repeals the 1981 Act and is aimed at transforming the KDU into a fully-fledged university, widening its objectives and powers to "provide courses of study and instructions in branches of learning" for "other persons" apart from military-related persons and public officers. According to the bill, the powers of the university include:

1. "Establish campuses, colleges, faculties, departments, centres, academic institutions and such other specialised institutes, schools and divisions as may be required by the University."
2. Recognise courses by those institutes and award degrees for such courses.
3. Affiliate with local and foreign higher educational institutions.
4. Charge fees determined by the University for those courses.

The charges will be so high that no poor students can afford them. Already, the fee for a four-year engineering student is nearly 2 million rupees (\$US13,000).

The university is to function under the defence ministry and can act "notwithstanding the provisions of the Universities Act of 1978," that governs other state universities, which are under the higher education ministry.

The KDU is controlled by a board of governors consisting of senior officers from the defence ministry and armed forces. It will be presided over by a vice chancellor

appointed by the president from among senior military officers.

Military discipline will be imposed on the university. According to the Army web site, its Suriyawewa campus is under "strict discipline maintained due to close supervision by the Military staff of the campus." Students and staff will have dress a code, and will be vetted for "national security" reasons.

Significantly, if the defence minister is "of the view that any situation prevailing in the University is likely to endanger national security or is detrimental or prejudicial to national policy" or disrupt the functioning of institution "he may direct board of governors to take all steps to bring such situation under control."

This bill is part of a deepening privatisation of education and militarisation of society. Such military-run universities have operated for decades in Pakistan, named the National Defence University of Pakistan and National University of Science and Technology.

Pakistan's military is a major force in that country's political and economic decisions and controls a sizable section of the economy. The Sri Lankan military is asserting a similarly powerful position, consuming the largest share of the budget, with a 2018 allocation of 290 billion rupees, and systematically developing economic activities. The 30-year communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam was used to boost the military.

President Maithripala Sirisena came to power in January 2015, promising to increase public expenditure on education. This rhetoric was part of a series of bogus promises made by the right-wing "good governance" movement organised around him to divert social opposition against former President Mahinda Rajapakse's repressive rule.

For the past three years, the government has not increased the allocation for education, which remained at 1.9 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) in 2017, while education facilities are rapidly deteriorating.

University students have continued their protests against the privatisation of higher education, demanding the

abolition of the South Asian Institute of Technology and Medicine (SAITM), a foreign-affiliated fee levying private medical college. Medical students have joined this campaign, conducting a nine month-long lecture boycott.

However, the Inter University Student Federation (IUSF), controlled by the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), limited students' campaigns to pressuring the government to abolish SAITM. They joined hands with the trade unions and even right-wing opposition members in the name of intensifying pressure on the government.

The answer of the Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe was to unleash brutal police violence against student protests and arrest student leaders.

As a manoeuvre, the government then declared it would "abolish" SAITM and provide its students with a separate solution. Hailing the government decision as a victory, the IUSF shut down students' protests. The government later decided to enrol SAITM students at KDU for a fee-paying medical course.

The Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) called several strikes aimed at deflecting concerns of doctors over the privatisation of medical degrees. But later it suggested enrolling the SAITM students at KDU and praised the government for implementing its proposal.

GMOA now claims that it opposes the bill because the government is preparing to launch SAITM in another name and the KDU could ignore the Sri Lanka Medical Council.

IUSF leaders, including its convenor Lahiru Weerasekera, are currently criticising the government for the privatisation and militarisation of education and declaring they will launch "massive protests."

The IUSF and GMOA are promoting futile campaigns to pressure the government to abandon the bill. This is another trap for students, workers and doctors, diverting their opposition to the government's privatisation agenda.

Slashing public education is part of the ruling coalition's broader economic "reform" program, dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as a condition for a \$US1.5 billion bailout loan granted in 2016.

Under the IMF's terms, the government must slash its fiscal expenditure to 3.5 percent of GDP by 2020. This means gutting subsidies and social programs, including education and health, privatising state-owned enterprises and increasing taxes.

Public education has become a central target in every country when imposing the burden of crisis-ridden world capitalism. In America, hundreds of thousands of teachers are in struggle across numerous states, with the backing of students, demanding pay increases and restoration of school funding. In the UK, university teachers are in a struggle against pension cuts. In India, university teachers and

students have launched campaigns against granting so-called autonomous status to universities in order to transform them into fee-levying institutes.

No amount of pressurising the government will change its policies, which have been determined by the capitalist crisis and international finance capital. The IYSSE has intervened in the struggles of students and doctors, explaining that a political struggle is needed to defeat the government attacks.

Only by spending billions of rupees can a decent, qualitatively improved education be provided for all. The massive funds needed for this program can be realised only by seizing the wealth of the banks, big companies and large estates, and repudiating foreign loans. Such actions can be implemented only by a workers' and peasants government, established by the working class, rallying the poor oppressed and youth around it.

The IUSF, FSP and other pseudo-left groups and trade unions are trying to prevent such a struggle because they all are tied to the capitalist system and seek solutions within it. Students must reject these lackeys of capitalism.

The IYSSE appeals to students to turn to the working class, which is the revolutionary force that can lead the fight for a socialist program. The experience of workers in different sectors who came into struggles in the past several months has been that they cannot defend their rights by appealing to the government. What is needed is the fight for an international socialist program.

We urge students and youth to join us to build a socialist movement to fight for this revolutionary perspective. The IYSSE is the youth movement of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP). We appeal to students to build IYSSE branches to struggle for this program.



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