

Sri Lankan government unleashes brutal police attack on student demonstration

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Yesterday Sri Lankan police unleashed a savage attack on students protesting in Colombo against President Ranil Wickremesinghe's ongoing anti-democratic measures and its social attacks on the working class and the poor.

About 2,000 students, mobilised by the Inter-University Student Federation (IUSF), began a demonstration at Lipton Circus in Central Colombo at around 3 p.m., planning to march to Colombo Fort, about three kilometres away.

Addressing the media at the start of the march, IUSF convener Wasantha Mudalige said that there was no warrant banning the demonstration, which was called, he said, because none of the problems facing the masses had been resolved. He warned President Wickremesinghe not to use any repression against protesters.

A senior police officer declared, however, that the protest was "illegal," that the police had the power to arrest demonstrators, and that they could take any measures to stop the event.

Sri Lankan police and security forces have been given wide-ranging power under the Colombo government's draconian emergency laws. Wickremesinghe proclaimed a state of emergency on July 17, three days after being appointed acting president by former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse, who fled the country after months of mass protests.

Student protesters yesterday chanted slogans such as, "Ranil-Rajapakse junta must go. Stop repression," "Release the arrested Aragalaya [protest] activists," and "Build peoples' councils." Other chants included, "Reopen the universities and schools," "Relief for the people," "No more loans," "Return stolen money," "For a new constitution to protect people's power," and "Abolish the executive presidency."

Half an hour after the march began, students were confronted by a massive contingent of 500 police, including riot control officers, and accompanied by two water cannons.

The marchers were immediately assaulted with water cannons and tear gas. Police officers and heavily-armed members of the riot control unit chased students for more than two kilometres towards Borella, repeatedly firing the water cannon and tear gas. Police beat demonstrators, dragging some of them away into police jeeps.

When several hundred students rallied at Borella Junction, they were violently attacked again with water cannons and riot police, who chased them towards Narahenpita, another part of Colombo. Police also stopped public transport buses, searching for students, and attempting to detain them.

According to media reports, six activists were arrested, including IUSF convener Mudalige and Inter-University Bhikkhu Federation convener Gallewé Siridhamma.

Students from Kelaniya, South-East and Rajarata universities protested yesterday evening, condemning the police attacks and calling for all arrested student activists to be released.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) condemns the vicious police repression, demands the immediate release of all arrested protesters and dropping of all charges.

This police brutality is a clear warning that the Wickremesinghe government will attempt to use all its repressive powers—including unleashing the military and police to crush any and all anti-government actions by workers, youth and the poor who fight for their social and democratic rights.

It is four months since the eruption of a mass uprising involving millions of Sri Lankan workers, young people and the rural poor calling for resignation of President Rajapakse and his government. The mass protests and general strikes—the largest in Sri Lankan history—demanded an end to the rampant inflation, shortages of essentials, such as food, medicine and fuel, and lengthy power cuts. The anti-government uprising forced Rajapakse and his regime to resign, shaking the ruling elite to its core.

Less than 24 hours after his anti-democratic appointment as president by parliament, Wickremesinghe ordered a July 22 violent predawn military-police attack on protesters occupying the presidential secretariat and Galle Face Green. Nine activists were arrested and many injured in the attacks. Scores of other activists have been arrested since the pre-dawn raids.

The Wickremesinghe regime has made clear that it will implement the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) savage austerity measures, including the destruction of hundreds of thousands of public sector jobs, the privatisation of state-owned enterprises, higher taxes and further cuts to price subsidies.

Wickremesinghe has called on all the opposition parties to form an all-party government in an attempt to rally the capitalist establishment as a whole to implement the IMF's demands. Wickremesinghe and the ruling elite, however, are haunted by the mass upsurge that brought down Rajapakse and fear a new eruption of struggles against austerity.

Millions of workers, backed by the rural poor and the oppressed, walked out in general strikes on April 28, May 6, May 10 and May 11 to demand the resignation of Rajapakse and his regime. The trade unions limited these to one-day protests and called for an interim parliamentary regime, the same demand being made by the opposition Samagi Jana Balavegaya and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna.

The pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party, which controls the IUSF, backed this campaign, and has worked to block any independent movement of working class on a socialist and internationalist program.

Yesterday's violent police attack once again highlights the urgent necessity for the development of an independent movement of the working class to rally

the rural poor and take forward the fight against the Wickremesinghe regime and the entire capitalist profit system, which created this social and economic catastrophe.

From the outset, the SEP and the IYSSE have intervened in the mass struggles of the working class and the poor on the basis of a program of revolutionary action. We fight for the building of action committees of workers in every workplace, estate, the major economic centres and in the rural areas, independent of all bourgeois parties and the trade unions.

The SEP is fighting for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of workers and rural masses based on these action committees to defeat capitalist austerity and the government attacks on democratic rights.

The SEP advocates a struggle for the democratic workers' control over the production and distribution of all essentials, the seizure of the wealth of billionaires and the major corporations, and the repudiation of all foreign loans in order to address the enormous social problems workers and the poor are facing. Building this congress will provide the means to establish a workers' and peasants' government and the reorganisation of society along socialist lines to meet the needs of the majority and as part of the struggle for international socialism.



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