

Sri Lankan police brutally attack student protest demanding the release of political prisoners

Sakuna Jayawardena
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Last Friday, the Sri Lankan government of President Ranil Wickremesinghe unleashed a brutal police attack on a protest in Colombo organised by the Inter University Students' Federation (IUSF), demanding the release of IUSF convener Wasantha Mudalige, another student activist Galwewa Siridamma, and other political prisoners. The protest marked 90 days since the arrest of Mudalige and Siridamma.

Two days before the demonstration, Colombo Chief Magistrate T.N.L. Mahawaththa, in response to a Terrorism Investigation Division (TID) request, ordered Mudalige and Siridhamma to be remanded in custody, instead of releasing them on the day their detention order would expire. They had been detained for 90 days under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). Wickremesinghe had personally signed the order for their detention under the PTA.

More than 3,000 students from universities across the island participated in the demonstration outside the United Nations office in Colombo demanding the release of Mudalige and Siridhamma. They displayed placards such as "Withdraw the Prevention of Terrorism Act!" "Release all political prisoners!" and "Ninety days to November 18."

Even before the start of the protest, police, including anti-riot units, had blocked the road leading to the UN office. Half an hour into the rally, as the protesters marched towards Galle Road and along Flower Road where the Prime Minister's Office is located, police teams came forward to disperse them, using tear gas and water cannons.

Another protest was started near the Narahenpita Terrorist Investigation Unit to avoid the police attacks.

Demonstrators also gathered near the Nelum Pokuna theatre, chanting slogans.

Police attacked protesters at the latter location, using water cannons and chasing them when they were running to escape. Several people fell down and were injured. After that, the IUSF protesters gathered in front of Welikada prison where Mudalige and Siridhamma are now being detained. This rally was again broken up by police, who chased some protesters for several kilometres.

The IUSF reported on its Facebook page that one protester named Shehan Pasindu was arrested and brutally beaten while in police custody, and then denied medical treatment. Amid growing public opposition, he appeared in court the following day and was released on bail.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) condemn this police crackdown and demand the immediate release of the two arrested IUSF activists and the withdrawal of all repressive laws.

The SEP and IYSSE make these calls while firmly opposing the politics of the IUSF, and the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) that leads it. Both organisations strive to keep students' opposition to the government within the framework of capitalism.

The brutal attacks on the student protesters show that the government will not tolerate any democratic rights, including freedom of assembly and speech, as it implements harsh austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund. The crackdown is aimed at intimidating the entire working class and the rural masses.

The government and the ruling elite were terrified by

the April-July mass upsurge, involving millions of workers and poor people, which led to the resignation of former President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and the collapse of his government. The unelected Wickremasinghe government is preparing for a renewed resurgence of popular struggles against its attacks on living standards and the suppression of democratic rights.

In the name of “fighting the repression,” the FSP and IUSF are allying with bourgeois parties such as the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Tamil National Alliance and the trade unions. All these forces are seeking to disarm students by directing futile appeals to the United Nations Human Rights Council and embassies of western powers. Previously, they worked together to divert the struggle against the Rajapakse regime behind the demands presented by the SJB and JVP for an interim capitalist government.

The SEP and IYSSE intervened in this struggle, calling on the working class to build their own action committees, independent of the capitalist parties and trade unions, in order to fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government based on a socialist program. Such committees would also provide the means to unite with workers internationally, who confront the same global economic and social crisis and the growth of authoritarian forms of rule.

The IYSSE urged students to turn to the working class and fight to establish its political independence from the trade unions and FSP-IUSF and bourgeois parties. Only the working class can provide the leadership to carry out the revolutionary task of overthrowing the crisis-ridden capitalist system and put an end to its never-ending attacks on social and democratic rights of workers, youth and the rural masses.

Because of the role played by the FSP and the unions in blocking workers from this struggle, even though the Rajapakse government was overthrown, the capitalist class remained in power.

Now these organisations are seeking to downplay state repression and promote the illusion that it can be brought to an end by pressuring the government through protests. On the same day as the protest, FSP propaganda secretary Duminda Nagamuwa boasted to the Sinhala daily *Divaina*: “The protest was conducted

very successfully by perplexing the intelligence agencies.”

In fact, the Wikremasinghe government is intensifying the assault on the working class. Its budget released last week includes drastic cuts to public spending, increased taxes on working people and privatisation measures, while education and healthcare are being starved of funds. Military spending will be increased by 50 billion rupees to 539 billion rupees, as part of the preparations to repress popular opposition.

The attacks on democratic and social rights can be defeated only through a political struggle against the Wickremasinghe government and all the established capitalist parties and their pseudo-left and trade union allies. We call on students to break from all the capitalist parties and organisations, join the IYSSE and fight for the independent mobilisation of the working class to form a government of workers and peasants, committed to a socialist program.

As part of this fight, the SEP and IYSSE advances the following demands:

- * Release all political prisoners immediately and unconditionally!

- * Repeal all repressive laws including the PTA, Essential Public Service Act, Public Security Ordinance Act and Emergency Law!

- * Abolish the executive presidential system!

We also call upon youth and workers to participate in the December 10 international webinar, “For a mass movement of youth and students to stop the war in Ukraine!” organised by the IYSSE.



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