

Police attack protest by Sri Lankan students against state repression

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Last Monday, more than 3,000 university students from across Sri Lanka protested in Colombo against the state repression unleashed by the government of President Ranil Wickremasinghe. The protest was organised by the Inter University Students Federation (IUSF), which is controlled by the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP).

Protesters raised slogans and displayed placards demanding an end to state repression, the release of IUSF convener Wasantha Mudalige and other political prisoners, and welfare relief for working people. Police attacked the protesters twice with water cannons while they were marching at Colpetty and Nelum Pokuna. Three protesters were arrested.

The protest marked 150 days since the arrest of Mudalige. Despite demands for release of the IUSF convener, yesterday the Colombo Chief Magistrate remanded him again until January 31. Mudalige was detained under the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) for organising students in mass protests last year against the Rajapakse government.

Even before the protest started, a massive police presence, including personnel from the notorious Anti-Riot Unit, had been deployed to Lipton Circus where the protest was originally to be held. Protesters shifted to outside the United Nations office in Colombo and demonstrated there for about half an hour. They displayed placards stating, “Withdraw the Prevention of Terrorism Act!” “Release all political prisoners!” “Bring down the price of goods, living costs and taxes.” The protesters then marched towards Galle Road.

After the march started, police including the Anti-Riot Unit, Police Special Task Force and three water cannons massed at Colpetty Junction on Galle Road to block the demonstration. As students confronted the

police roadblock, a senior police officer declared that the protest was “illegal,” citing a clause in the repressive Police Ordinance Act which requires six hours’ notice of any demonstration. He warned that police had the power to arrest demonstrators and would take measures to stop the march. The police then fired water cannons and tear gas to disperse the protest.

Students continued their march towards the University of the Visual and Performing Arts. When they reached the university, police attacked the students, using water cannons and tear gas for a second time. Dhammika Munasinghe, an FSP member, was arrested. IUSF leaders addressed the protesters gathered outside the university.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and its youth and student wing, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), condemn this police crackdown on protesting students and demand the immediate release of all political prisoners, including Mudalige, and the withdrawal of all repressive laws.

The SEP/IYSSE makes these demands despite its well-known political differences with the IUSF and the FSP. Their protests are based on the bankrupt perspective of pressuring the government to end its repressive measures. Students wanting to fight state repression and the government’s austerity measures are thereby confined to the reactionary framework of bourgeois rule.

In a press conference held on Sunday, IUSF acting convener Terenz Rodrigo blamed the government for “using institutions funded by the tax money of the public, such as the Terrorist Investigation Division (TID), for their personal interests.” These remarks are a graphic exposure of the capitalist politics of the IUSF/FSP and their prostration before the bourgeois state of which the TID is an integral part.

The Wickremasinghe government utilises the TID not primarily for personal purposes but above all to defend bourgeois rule by ruthlessly suppressing the opposition of workers, youth and rural toilers to its IMF-dictated austerity agenda. The FSP/IUSF operates within the framework of the political establishment.

Rodrigo appealed to the government to end repression and provide relief to people, and then thundered: “We are ready, as IUSF members and fighters, to organise people to take forward their struggle to win their rights.” These futile appeals, along with the empty threats, will simply fall on deaf ears.

By unleashing a police crackdown against the protest, the Wickremasinghe government has once again demonstrated that it will respond to opposition with repression. Facing an immense economic crisis, the government is desperate to impose the harsh austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in return for emergency loans.

The ongoing police repression contains serious political lessons for workers, students and youth. Since the arrest of Mudalige last August, police have attacked student protests more than six times. Students cannot defend their rights by appealing to the very powers that are attacking them. The struggle for democratic rights is a political fight against the government and bourgeois rule. Students need to turn towards the working class, the only social force which can lead that fight.

At the same time, the SEP/IYSSE calls workers to independently intervene to defend students and youth against state repression.

The IUSF and FSP are orienting in a diametrically oppose direction—to bourgeois opposition parties like the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and imperialist organisations such as the United Nations and the UN Human Rights Council.

The IUSF is in discussion with opposition parties like the SJB under the pretext of “ending the repression of the Wickremasinghe government,” claiming that this is the only way to win. The SJB and other opposition parties, however, have no fundamental differences with the government over the IMF program. They are seeking to exploit the popular opposition against the government and to come to power in a general election, only to implement the same austerity measures. As their history demonstrates, they would be just as

ruthless in unleashing state repression.

The FSP/IUSF worked in collaboration with the trade unions to derail last year’s popular uprising of workers, youths and rural toilers against the Rajapakse government, falsely claiming that an “interim government” including the opposition parties would address the social disaster facing working people. This only paved the way Wickremasinghe to come to power.

The SEP/IYSSE insists that state repression and the worsening social conditions can only be halted by mobilising the independent strength of the working class against Wickremasinghe government. We call for the formation of action committees of workers and the poor in every workplace, factory, plantation, neighbourhood and rural area, independent of all the bourgeois parties, their trade unions and their pseudo-left agents. The SEP has launched a campaign to build a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses, based on those action committees, as the basis for developing the political fight for a government of workers and peasants to implement socialist policies. The SEP/IYSSE calls students to join us in that struggle.



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