

Sri Lankan government unleashes brutal state attacks on student protests

Our reporters
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On Tuesday, the Wickremesinghe government unleashed a brutal state attack on a student demonstration organised by the Inter University Students Federation (IUSF). Students from universities across the island participated in the protest.

Hundreds of police personnel, including from the anti-riot unit and the special task force, were deployed along with army personnel at several road junctions to block the student demonstration. They were armed with guns, tear gas, and water cannon. Some used iron clubs and wooden rods against the students.

The IUSF had planned to begin their protest at Colombo Fort railway station at about 12 noon. The police, however, read out an order obtained from the Colombo Fort magistrate's court to about 1,000 students who had already gathered outside the station. The order barred demonstrators from entering Galle Face Green, the Presidential Secretariat, the President's House, Finance Ministry premises and several roads in central Colombo between 11 a.m. and 10 p.m.

The students then travelled by buses to the New Town Hall area about three kilometres away from Fort, planning to march up to Nugegoda, a city bordering Colombo, and hold a rally. They carried banners and placards with the slogans, "Abolish Prevention of Terrorism Act," "Stop witch-hunting students," "Release two detained students of Kelaniya University," "Chase away Ranil-Rajapakse junta," "Get ready for a system change," "Return robbed money," "Bring down the price of goods and taxes," and "Win a new constitution."

The police opened fire with water cannons and tear gas as the marchers approached Colombo University. When the protesters ran inside the university's law faculty, police and soldiers entered the university premises and kept attacking students. The students

attempted to defend themselves with whatever they could find.

Students attending lectures were also badly affected by tear gas with some hospitalised. University officials rushed to the campus entrance, confronting the police and condemning their attacks.

On Wednesday, two separate protests were held at universities in Colombo and Kelaniya denouncing the previous day's police assault. Police then attacked the Kelaniya students' protest on the main road along the university. Six students were arrested.

Colombo University students marched from the university premises to the National Museum and the Royal College, where they were also assaulted by police. The police attack was so reckless that other students, teachers and passersby were impacted.

That morning President Wickremesinghe made a special statement bragging about the possible approval of an International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout loan and declaring that the international bank's "economic reforms are crucial in order to move forward." He warned: "If this program is disrupted by agitations, this government will act strongly for it." In other words, all protests against IMF austerity will be brutally crushed.

Speaking to journalists, IUSF convener Wasantha Mudalige said last year's mass demonstrations had succeeded in expelling then President Gotabhaya Rajapakse and his government. "But the real long-standing needs of the people require real economic and political change," Mudalige added. "We have a democratic right to chase away scoundrels like Wickremesinghe... This society is in a grave crisis. To get out of this crisis we will have to take radical decisions and make radical economic reforms," he said.

The IUSF is controlled by the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP).

Mudalige's call for "radical economic reforms" is in line with the FSP's political perspective, which is to demand "reforms" within the capitalist system. This is why the FSP backs the trade unions, which are promoting the political illusion that workers can win their social demands by pressuring the Wickremesinghe regime.

Workers and students must reject the pro-capitalist program of the FSP, the IUSF, the trade unions and similar opportunist organisations. The capitalist crisis in Sri Lanka is part of an historic crisis of the global capitalist system. As in every other country, Sri Lankan workers and the poor cannot overcome the worsening social problems they confront within the decaying capitalist order.

While Sri Lankan students, who confront unbearable economic and social problems, are attracted to the protests organised by the IUSF, they have little political faith in this organisation. This was expressed in some of the protesters' comments to WSWs reporters.

One second-year student told the WSWs on Tuesday that he was not supporting the IUSF but had decided to attend the protest because students were determined to win their basic rights. "The IMF austerity measures," he said, "are pushing people into the abyss. Our bursary [student allowance] has not been paid. Students are undergoing real hardships because of the country's situation."

A second-year applied science student from Sabaragamuwa University, about 150 kilometres south-east of Colombo, participated in Tuesday's demonstration. She explained the increasing police repression at her campus.

"Ten of our comrades are under police detention. They have been charged under the anti-ragging [disorderly conduct] act, even though our university does not have ragging as such. That is why we came here to give maximum support to this protest," she said.

Another student referred to the demands of the IUSF and the FSP for a "system [and] constitutional change" and added, "Even if new clean leaders are elected to the parliament, the system will remain the same. The problem is the capitalist system."

He then asked about the analysis advanced by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Student for Socialist Equality (IYSSE). WSWs reporters explained that in order to fight the

government's attacks, workers and the rural poor need to build their own independent action committees at every workplace, factory, plantation and neighbourhood.

During the discussion, WSWs reporters emphasised that this struggle had to be developed as an independent political movement of the working class, rallying the rural masses to build a government of workers and peasants based on socialist policies. Students could only defend their social rights, including free education, by joining the IYSSE and turning to the working class to fight for this revolutionary socialist program, they explained.

The Wickremesinghe government's violent and ongoing state attacks on student protests and his threatening speech in the parliament are a warning that Colombo is preparing to step up its repressive measures.

The SEP and the IYSSE stand shoulder to shoulder with students protesting the government attacks. Students have certainly displayed their courage and determination to fight, but the pro-capitalist illusions cultivated by the FSP and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and their insistence that the government can be pressured to end its social attacks, are a dangerous trap.

The SEP and IYSSE call upon the students and youth to assimilate the lessons of last year's popular upsurge as analysed by WSWs, join the SEP and fight for its perspective: the independent mobilisation of the working class and the rural masses on a socialist and internationalist program to put an end to the profit system.



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