

Hands off the IYSSE's democratic rights on Sri Lankan universities!

International Youth and Students for Social Equality (Sri Lanka)
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This open letter by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (Sri Lanka) was posted on the Sinhala-language section of the WSWS on March 3.

1. President of the Students Union of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Sri Jayawardenepura.

2. President of the University Students Union, University of Sri Jayawardenepura.

3. Vasantha Mudalige, Convener of the Inter University Students Federation.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) denounces with contempt the acts of thuggery by a group of Humanities and Social Sciences Faculty Students Union (HSSFSU) members against IYSSE member Sakuntha Hirimutugoda, and threats against Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members Pani Wijesiriwardena and Wasantha Rupasinghe, at the university on February 23. The IYSSE is the international youth wing of the SEP.

Hirimutugoda, who had completed his degree courses six months earlier at the university's Applied Science Faculty, was involved in a political discussion with a student on the afternoon on February 23. The student wanted further information on the working-class internationalist politics of the SEP and IYSSE after attending a February 7 lecture by Wijesiriwardena. The lecture was organised by the Student Union of the Department of Political Science at the university.

Wijesiriwardena explained during the SEP lecture that the sole social force capable of defending social rights, such as free education, and democratic rights, including freedom of expression, was the international working class. He made clear that the Inter University Students Federation (IUSF), which is controlled by the pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), is hostile to this classical Marxist position.

The lecturer said that the aim of the IUSF's "student politics" was to prevent students from turning to the working class, and to trap them behind the myth that their rights could be won by exerting pressure on capitalist governments, thus defending capitalism.

On February 23, Hirimutugoda was explaining to the student the reactionary nature of the practice of the IUSF, and the student unions guided by it. During the discussion, two student

"activists" suddenly rushed in, threatening the student talking to Hirimutugoda. They accused the student of causing an incident at the university on February 14 and prepared to physically attack him. When Hirimutugoda objected, the two activists accused him of being involved in the previous clash, and demanded to know what he was doing on campus.

IYSSE member Hirimutugoda challenged the "activists," emphasising his democratic right to be there, making clear that he had no connection with any previous clash and stating that he was a member of the SEP and IYSSE. Angered by his response, the "activists" attempted to hit him, declaring that "party politics" could not be discussed, and that only "student politics" were allowed at the university. They also began making phone calls in order to mobilise other HSSFSU members.

When Hirimutugoda phoned the SEP, informing it of the situation, these individuals forcibly seized his phone. One activist threatened to "smash in" Hirimutugoda's face if he was not suspended from classes. About ten individuals, including HSSF third-year students Lakshan Sandaruwan, Ranindu Ratnayake and Hasitha Piyumal Bandara were involved.

A university disciplinary officer arrived and took Hirimutugoda to the disciplinary superintendent's office. The group of students followed, issuing threatening remarks: "Do you accept the university 'subculture'?" "Party politics divides students!" "If you come again, let's see what will happen to you!" While Hirimutugoda was in the disciplinary superintendent's office, the student thugs stood outside the door searching through his phone.

Your organisations, which claim that there is no space for party politics at the universities, are engaged in definite party politics, both on and off the universities. Students and everyone else, including yourselves, know very well that it is the FSP's politics.

While your organisations are involved in party politics at the universities, you forcefully prevent other parties from doing so, especially the SEP and IYSSE which are based on proletarian internationalism. This is completely anti-democratic and deceitful.

In opposition to your fraudulent claims, the IYSSE stands

openly, at the universities and elsewhere, under the banners of the IYSSE, the SEP and the International Committee of the Fourth International, which is the world party of the working class and provides leadership to the Socialist Equality Parties. The tradition of Marxists is to openly stand in the name of their political organisation. These traditions are utterly foreign to the pseudo-left FSP and its IUSF.

One further point needs to be made. Despite our sharp and uncompromising political differences, the SEP and IYSSE have a consistent and unchallengeable historical record of fighting against every anti-democratic attack and state witch-hunt unleashed on other organisations, including yours, and their leaders.

By banning the politics of the SEP and IYSSE, you are violating our democratic right of freedom of expression to disseminate our political ideas among students, and the rights of students to know about these ideas.

Peddling “student politics” and banning working-class socialist politics on the universities was begun under the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which then controlled the IUSF. Although the FSP organisationally broke with the JVP, it follows the same reactionary politics.

You carry out these thuggish activities under the pretext of defending the university “subculture.” The uncultured nature of this so-called subculture finds its foul expression in the crackdown against the IYSSE.

Your “subculture” has a discredited history at Sri Jayawardenepura University. In November 2002, a group of students influenced by this “subculture” attacked Samantha Vithanage, who was beaten and killed by thugs who dropped a computer monitor on his head. IUSF thugs attacked Vithanage, and other students, because they opposed ragging [bullying]. As a result of this “subculture,” democratic political discussions among university students on campuses are completely banned.

You say that party politics at the universities creates disunity among students. But the opposite is the case. The basic reason for clashes between students is a result of your leadership, and your attempts to suppress students who hold alternative political views.

At the same time, your student unions are so reactionary that they unite with the university administration, and at times with the police, to suppress your political opponents. In your anti-democratic intervention against an IYSSE member, you shamelessly associated yourselves with the disciplinary superintendent’s office, which is part of the university administration and the repressive apparatus used to suppress student activists, including yourselves.

Employing the same allegations as the student thugs, the disciplinary superintendent accused Hirimutugoda of “illegally” entering the university premises and provoking a “clash” between students.

Opposing these false claims, the IYSSE member categorically denied this allegation and said that he had a democratic right to discuss politics in the university. He rejected the accusation that he had caused a student clash and explained that it had been fueled by the “activists.”

The disciplinary officer responded by threatening to hand over Hirimutugoda to the police and refusing to return his mobile phone from the students. He also declared that the university was an “institution” where “no democratic rights apply” and any “outsider” entering the premises must have permission from the Vice Chancellor.

When Wijesiriwardena and Rupasinghe came to defend Hirimutugoda, the student activists employed the same thuggery and even attempted to inspect their mobile phones. The student thugs then worked with disciplinary officers to force the two SEP members from the university premises.

Later, after about an hour of intimidation, the university’s disciplinary superintendent released Hirimutugoda when SEP General Secretary Deepal Jayasekera telephoned him, insisting on the party’s democratic rights to work on the university’s premises.

This anti-democratic intervention reveals not the strength of your organisations but their weakness. What you fear is that the international socialist perspective of the IYSSE will gain ground among the students as your bankrupt policies are exposed by the deepening crisis of capitalism.

Students cannot go forward with these pro-capitalist organisations. They can only defend their rights by breaking with these outfits and turning to the working class in the fight for international socialism. This is the IYSSE’s perspective. It is the only organisation with a viable political program that fights against the threat of another world war, austerity measures and attacks on democratic rights.

Threats will not intimidate us or limit our political activities. We have always openly expressed our ideas and are ready to debate them publicly. But we are not ready to accept any ban or restriction on our freedom to hold these ideas, and will mobilise support on and off the universities to defend our rights.

Yours sincerely,

Kapila Fernando

Convener of IYSSE (Sri Lanka)



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