

Sri Lankan police attack student protests against austerity measures

Sakuna Jayawardena
10 March 2024

The Sri Lankan police attacked two student protests in Colombo last week. The police attacks are part of repressive actions ordered by President Ranil Wickremesinghe's government to try to crush opposition to its savage austerity and anti-democratic measures.

Last Tuesday, one police crackdown stopped a demonstration organised by several student groups. Protesters were demanding solutions to hostel and other welfare problems, a halt to the selling of medical degrees, increased scholarship funds to match the cost of living, and the abolition of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and other repressive laws.

A police riot squad confronted the 1,000-strong demonstration as it entered a main road from the Colombo University premises. Another police battalion armed with water cannon-fitted vehicles and tear gas began attacking students until they retreated to the university premises. Police then fired tear gas canisters into the students gathered inside the university.

Earlier in the day, in an act of intimidation, the police stopped buses carrying students from the Peradeniya University to join the demonstration. Police checked the vehicles and questioned students about where they were going. Later, the students were allowed to proceed.

The second protest was held on Wednesday, also in central Colombo. It was organised by the Inter University Student Federation (IUSF) with the participation of hundreds of students from several universities. The slogans raised in this demonstration were similar to the ones the previous day.

Hundreds of policemen had been stationed at the starting point of the protest at Punchi Borella in Colombo. As students began the march, police attacked them mercilessly with water cannons, tear gas and batons. When protestors tried to escape, police chased them through nearby roads. Some students hit by water cannon and tear gas were carried away by their colleagues.

Dozens of employees from the close-by Colombo National Hospital gathered near the road and shouted slogans condemning the police attack.

The police arrested two students, including IUSF convener Madhushan Chandrajith. Amid growing opposition to the attack, the Colombo magistrates' court on Thursday released them on personal sureties of 500,000 rupees each.

Protests by university students are being held almost every week, fuelled by unbearable conditions for undergraduates to continue their studies. Wickremasinghe's government is slashing expenditure on education as part of an International Monetary Fund (IMF)-imposed austerity program.

The allocation for education in this year's budget was 242 billion rupees, an increase of only 5 billion rupees from the previous year. As the annual inflation rates for 2022 and 2023 were as high as 46 and 18 percent respectively, this is not sufficient to even maintain the low levels of university and general education.

The overwhelming majority of university students are from poverty-stricken families, impacted by an unprecedented economic crisis and the IMF's harsh measures. The pittance that students receive under the government-sponsored Mahapola scholarship aid system is inadequate for daily expenses.

Many students are seeking part-time jobs, not only to live but also to send some money to their poor parents. They complain about having to miss vital lectures in order to work. Around 1,000 teachers, many of them specialised lecturers, have left the country to escape the economic hardships, increasing the problems of the universities.

These intolerable conditions have escalated unrest among students. The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) condemns the police crackdown. The working class must come to the defence of the students and fight to defend free public education.

In the past two years, police have continuously attacked student protests. This is part of the assault on the democratic and social rights of the working class. One of the sharpest expressions of these attacks is the victimisation of workers in the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB). It is preparing to penalise 66 employees for violating draconian Essential Public Services Act regulations by protesting against the privatisation of the CEB.

The IYSSE is emphasising that students have to find a viable program and perspective to fight against the attack on education and democratic rights.

Last week's protests were organised by two rival groups. Wednesday's protest was called by the IUSF while another student group supporting the opposition Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) called the previous day's demonstration. The JVP, which began as a radical Sinhala populist party preaching guerrillaism, has transformed into a parliamentary party of the Colombo political establishment over the past three decades.

The IUSF was earlier controlled by the JVP but shifted its allegiance to the fake-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) which was formed by a JVP dissident group in 2012. Since then, like the JVP beforehand, the FSP has controlled the IUSF bureaucratically.

IUSF leaders, including its convener Chandrajith, are currently engaged in discussions with opposition political parties, including the JVP and Samagi Jana Balawegaya, and trade union leaders to form a reactionary alliance in the name of putting pressure on the government.

The IUSF is peddling the illusion that by pressuring Wickremesinghe's government students can push back its attacks on social and democratic rights. Decades-long protest actions by the IUSF have been a blind-alley for students as successive regimes have only deepened the attack on free public education.

After being bailed out on Thursday, Chandrajith spoke to the media, repeating his group's mantra: "We should solve these [problems] in the streets." That means organising more protests to divert students' anger into trying to change the course of the Wickremesinghe regime.

The JVP, after attempting to retake control of the IUSF, has influence in some student unions, including in Colombo University. It is insisting that all the social problems facing the masses, including students, will be solved once the candidate of its electoral front, the National People's Power (NPP), wins the presidential election, scheduled to be held before mid-October. JVP-

led trade unions are propagating the same illusion, blocking workers' struggles.

This is a blatant push to divert the mass opposition into parliamentary illusions and garner the votes of workers, poor and young people. The JVP/NPP combine is fully committed to the IMF austerity program and the privatisation of education.

While there is genuine opposition from students to the government's attacks, they cannot go forward with JVP electoral politics or FSP protest politics. Neither will change the course of the capitalist assault on education or the misery faced by people.

These attacks are a product of the deep economic crisis in Sri Lanka, intensified by the global COVID-19 pandemic, the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine and the Israeli regime's genocide in Gaza, supported by the US and other imperialist powers. In many countries, including the US, UK and India, teachers and students have engaged in struggles to defend the right to education which has become one of the first victims of capitalist attacks.

There are no solutions for the workers and poor within the capitalist framework. Only the working class can provide the leadership to carry out the revolutionary task of overthrowing the crisis-ridden capitalist system and ending the attack on social and democratic rights.

The IYSSE urges students to turn to the working class and fight to establish its political independence from all the capitalist parties, pro-capitalist trade unions and pseudo-left traps. Build IYSSE branches in your universities to take up this struggle.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)