

Sri Lankan action committees condemn Peradeniya University ban on IYSSE meeting

Our correspondents
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The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) and Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka are receiving growing support for their campaign against Peradeniya University's ban on the IYSSE's January 3 public meeting.

This includes numerous statements and protest letters from students, academics and workers, in Sri Lanka and internationally, condemning the censorship.

The meeting, titled, "How to fight against the IMF austerity program," had been sponsored by the university's Political Science Students Association (PSSA) and permission had been given by the head of the Department of Political Science (DPS).

Acting Vice Chancellor Ranjith Pallegama instructed the head of the DPS to cancel the meeting unless the topic of the meeting was changed so as "not to appear" to challenge "government policies." Vice Chancellor Terrence Madhujith issued another letter on January 10, upholding and defending the ban.

The IYSSE has explained in several statements that the ban violated the freedom of speech, not only of the IYSSE and the PSSA, but of students, academics and non-academic workers. The university authorities' anti-democratic move was undoubtedly carried out at the request of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)/National People's Power (NPP) government, which has started to implement the IMF austerity program in full.

Today the WSWS is publishing extracts from statements sent by action committees representing teachers, students and parents, migrant workers, railway workers and free trade zone workers, to the vice chancellor of Peradeniya University.

The **Teachers, Students and Parents Action Committee to Defend Free Education** (TSPACDFE) wrote, "this ban is a serious attack on the democratic

rights of all university students and the working class."

The TSPACDFE letter draws the connection between the meeting ban and recent attacks on educators: "On December 2, a brutal police attack was carried out on School Development Officers who had been teaching in schools for 5 years."

The **Sri Lankan Migrant Workers Action Committee** (SLMWAC) letter states, "restricting university lectures or meetings that challenge government policies is a serious attack on freedom of speech."

The letter continues, "It is a serious violation of the democratic right of the IYSSE to express its views," trampling the democratic rights of university students, teachers, and non-academic staff.

"We would like to remind you that restricting freedom of speech by circumventing administrative rules and regulations is not an accepted tradition in national and international universities. The exercise of free speech, independent of those so-called rules and regulations, is a democratic tradition that students, academics, and non-academic workers have won through struggles over a long time."

The **Railway Workers Action Committee** (RWAC) condemned the university administration for citing false grounds to justify its undemocratic ban: "In his press release the VC [vice chancellor] claimed that the PSSA was not duly registered in the university and that it did not go through the relevant authorities to obtain approval. This is false, because the PSSA had obtained permission from an authoritative body—the PSD [Political Science Department]."

The letter explains the real reasons and class issues behind the ban, stating that the JVP/NPP "government of President Anura Dissanayake fears that the IYSSE meeting will reveal the consequences of the savage

IMF austerity programme and that the working class and the oppressed would rise against such measures.”

The RWAC letter continues: “Now, it is quite clear that the Peradeniya University administrators are deliberately attempting not only to ban the IYSSE meeting, but also to restrict future meetings and thus to violate freedom of expression in universities.... The JVP/NPP government will extend such anti-democratic measures against workers, students and others who will fight IMF austerity measures.”

The **Koggala Free Trade Zone Action Committee** (KFTZAC) wrote: “It is clear that steps to ban the meeting have been taken on the directives of the government.... The KFTZAC strongly condemns this anti-democratic action by the university authorities and the JVP/NPP government.

“University students and workers have the right to listen to and discuss critical views on the government’s economic and political policies, and to oppose the devastating IMF austerity measures that the government is implementing.

“The ban on the IYSSE meeting is a serious warning to university students, youth and the working class that the JVP/NPP government is unwilling to tolerate any opposition to the IMF program.”

The letter exposes how the government has already displayed its anti-democratic character in dealing with protesting school development officers, who were attacked by police and subjected to frame-up charges: “As part of this brutal crackdown by the government, a witch hunt has been unleashed against school development officers who protested in front of the Ministry of Education in Colombo on December 2, demanding their integration into the school teaching service.”

The letter explains the consequences of the harsh IMF measures that the Dissanayake government is fully committed to implementing, warning, “under the IMF austerity program, there is a serious attack on the jobs, wages and living conditions of the working class, as well as on social welfare services including free education and health.”

We urge students, teachers and workers to support our campaign against Peradeniya University’s ban on the IYSSE lecture and to send protest letters, condemning the ban, with copies to the IYSSE.

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To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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