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Condemn brutal Sri Lankan police attack on student demonstration!

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) calls upon the working class to condemn the ongoing police repression of student protests in Sri Lanka.

The latest police assault was directed against a student protest march organised by the Inter University Students Federation (IUSF) in Kelaniya on the outskirts of Colombo on Tuesday. The students were demanding the release of political prisoners and for solutions to the worsening economic situation facing the Sri Lankan masses.



Sri Lankan university students march on 18 October, 2022. [Photo: WSWs]

The IUSF called the protest to mark 60 days since the detention of its convener Wasantha Mudalige and Galwewa Siridamma from the Bhikku (Monks) Federation under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). Mudalige, Siridamma, and another activist, Hashan

Jeewantha, along with several other students, were arrested during a protest on August 18. President Ranil Wickremesinghe ordered them to be detained for 90 days under PTA.

Last Tuesday, about 1,000 students from various universities began marching from Kelaniya university at 3 p.m., planning to reach Colombo Fort, 11 kilometres away. About 2 kms from the university, the police mobilised a force of around 1,000 officers, including riot control and special task force units, backed by two water cannons, to block the protest. The marching students chanted slogans such as, “Repeal repressive laws, including the PTA immediately,” “Let’s get rid of the Wickremesinghe-Rajapakse junta,” and “Let us live—lower the tax burden.”

An hour after starting to march, students were confronted by police who declared that the protest was illegal and not been given police approval. Police then began breaking up the march, arresting eight students, including Kelaniya University Students Union President Kalum Mudannayake.



Police violently attack students from Kelaniya University on 18 October, 2022. [Photo: WSWS]

Police even tried to disperse chanting students who had gathered at a nearby road. After the protest, IUSF activist Janith Janajaya told the media, that one police officer had threatened them, saying “We will kill you.”

The arrested students were released on 50,000 rupees bail on Wednesday, amid widespread outrage over the government’s repression. Students from Kelaniya, Jayawardanepura, Rajarata universities protested on Wednesday, condemning the police attacks and calling for the release all arrested student activists. Previous protests organised by the IUSF demanding the release of those detained under the PTA—on August 30 and October 4—have been subjected to similar police assaults.

IUSF convener Mudalige, who is being held in a detention camp, is in serious danger. Police have taken him from the camp at night on several occasions under the guise of collecting evidence. Sri Lankan police are notorious for killing political prisoners taken from remand prisons, falsely claiming they were trying to escape.

On one occasion Mudalige was taken to the burnt-out home of former finance minister Basil Rajapakse. The property was torched during riots that erupted after right-wing thugs attacked protesters occupying Galle Face Green in May.

Hashan Jeewantha, who was detained with Mudalige, was released after 50 days, after police admitted that they had no evidence to charge him, another indication of the arbitrary nature of these arrests and detentions.

The ongoing police attacks on student demonstrations and other repressive actions are a clear warning to the working class. It is another indication that the Wickremesinghe government will use its repressive powers to crush all those opposing the austerity measures being unleashed in line with International Monetary Fund (IMF) dictates.

Last Tuesday, as the students were protesting, Ceylon Petroleum Corporation workers walked out on strike to oppose the privatisation of the state-owned industry. The government responded with threats to penalise the strikers under its draconian Essential Public Services Act.



Marching Sri Lanka students demand release of all political prisoners, 18 October, 2022. [Photo: WSWWS]

The SEP and the IYSSE condemn this police repression and demand the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners and the repeal of all repressive laws, including the PTA, Essential Public Services Act, Public Security Ordinance and Emergency Law. The IYSSE and SEP, however, politically oppose the IUSF and the

pseudo-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), whose pro-capitalist policies and claims that the ruling elites can be pressured, are strengthening the hand of the government.

The intensifying attacks of the Wickremesinghe government on workers and students highlights the urgent necessity for the development of an independent movement of the working class to defeat the Wickremesinghe government's attacks on jobs, living standards and democratic rights.

The IUSF and other pseudo-left formations, along with all the trade unions, are hostile to this perspective. The IUSF, which is led by the FSP, are calling on students and workers to appeal to the "international community" to pressure the government to halt police repression and protect human rights.

Last month, the FSP sent Nuwan Bopage, one of its key leaders as a representative of the IUSF, to the UN Human Rights Council meeting in Geneva to appeal for their help. The meeting was discussing a cynical resolution sponsored by the major imperialist powers, including the US and UK, for an international investigation into war crimes and violations of human rights in Sri Lanka. The real purpose of the resolution was not to defend human rights and punish war criminals but to pressure Colombo to fully integrate with Washington's military strategic confrontation against China.

Last Monday, the IUSF released a media statement appealing to the so-called international community to "monitor the anti-democratic repressive programme of the current government." As the same time, the IUSF and the FSP are seeking an alliance with capitalist parties, such as Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), and the trade unions for a joint platform to oppose government repression.

These parties, however, are all committed to the IMF's austerity program and will ruthlessly implement it if they come to power. The FSP and IUSF are falsely hailing the SJB and the JVP as champions of democratic and social rights.

Student leaders who spoke at the rally after the Tuesday demonstration called on the government and the police to end the repression. Janith Janajaya, member of Kelaniya university students' union, said: "We are sending a message to the government of this country that if they do not stop this repression, we will make sure to send the government home."

This reference is to the mass upsurges which began in April and forced Rajapakse and his government to resign. It covers up the fact that Wickremesinghe was able to come to power because the trade unions, backed by the FSP and IUSF, blocked the independent mobilisation of the working class on a socialist program.

The IYSSE urges students to reject the IUSF and FSP perspective and their alignment with Sri Lanka's capitalist parties and appeals to the imperialist powers. Students must turn to the working class and fight for the formation of action committees and the convening of a democratic and socialist congress of workers and rural masses. This will lay the basis for a workers' and peasants' government committed to restructuring society on socialist lines. The fight to release all political prisoners, including those student leaders detained under the PTA, repeal of all repressive laws and the defence of public free education is inseparable from the struggle for socialism. We urge students to build the IYSSE in their respective universities and other higher education institutions and take up the fight for this perspective.

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