

Sri Lankan education minister fobs off student leaders' demands

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On October 17, the Inter-University Student Federation (IUSF) and several other student groups met with new Sri Lankan Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya, calling on her to quickly resolve the deepening crisis in public education, including at the state universities.

Amarasuriya is also the education minister in President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)/National People's Power (NPP) government and a member of its three-member cabinet.

The IUSF is controlled by the fake-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) which has promoted illusions in the right-wing, pro-big business JVP/NPP regime and hailed Dissanayake's election as an expression of "people's expectations."

The student union leaders' meeting followed a seven-page letter from IUSF convener Madhushan Chandrajith to Amarasuriya outlining some of the problems facing students at state universities.

Addressing a media briefing on October 21, IUSF convener Chandrajith lamented that the student leaders did not receive a "positive response" from the minister to their calls for a speedy solution to the difficulties facing students.

The IUSF letter listed the lack of university hostels and lecture halls, delayed payments of *Mahapola* (financial assistance for students), teacher shortages and the privatisation of education. It stated that 12,900 teachers were needed at the state universities but only 6,548 are currently employed. The Management Faculty and the Faculty of Computer Science at Peradeniya and Sabaragamuwa universities respectively lack the necessary facilities to operate.

Registration fees for new students at the South-Eastern University have been ramped up from 2,100 rupees to 6,100 rupees (\$US20) with examination fees and other basic costs increased at other universities. The letter called for a halt to the privatisation of medical education and the meagre monthly *Mahapola* student aid payment increased to 10,000 rupees.

Predictably Amarasuriya, like previous education ministers, declared that the JVP/NPP administration would

not provide immediate solutions to these demands. The education minister, IUSF convener Chandrajith, told the media, was "unable to give a definitive answer" on stopping the privatisation of medical education and made clear that there will not be any increase *Mahapola* aid.

The IUSF has stated that the teacher shortages are a result of many leaving the country because of exorbitant pay-as-you-earn tax imposed by the former Wickremesinghe government. Amarasuriya told the delegation, however, that any review of Colombo's tax policies would take time and that it was not possible "to take a policy decision" on hostel shortages. In short, the minister fobbed off the student leaders.

This is no surprise but another confirmation that the Dissanayake government and its economic advisors are fully committed to International Monetary Fund (IMF) dictates. The new regime is doing everything possible to secure the next instalment of the \$3 billion IMF bailout loan by making it crystal clear that it will maintain Wickremesinghe's previous program.

These measures involved sharp tax increases, including the VAT, which has pushed up the price of essentials, imposed wage freezes, initiated the privatisation of state-owned enterprises and the destruction of an estimated 500,000 jobs, and the systematic slashing of government funding for education and health.

The JVP previously claimed that it supported students' and educators' demands that 6 percent of Sri Lanka's gross domestic product (GDP) should be allocated for education. NPP's fanciful and nationalist election manifesto—"Thriving Nation! Beautiful Country!"—insisted that it would "gradually raise the allocation to education up to 6 percent" of GDP.

Addressing a workshop of hundreds of school principals from across Sri Lanka on September 28, however, Amarasuriya said that 6 percent of GDP funding for education, in the context of the economic collapse, "cannot be implemented at once." The government, she cynically claimed, would aim for "these targets systematically."

IUSF convener Chandrajith told the media conference that the JVP/NPP had previously claimed that it was against Wickremesinghe's National Education Policy Framework which proposed increased privatisation. "After opposing this policy, I cannot understand why the NPP does not oppose the privatisation of medical education," he said. His letter had called on the new government to "immediately stop attempts to establish private medical colleges," declaring this to be the "responsibility of a government that fulfills the aspirations of the people."

The IUSF convener told the media that his organisation would initiate "agitation within the universities" to fight for their demands. In other words, the IUSF would hold protests claiming, just as they have under successive Colombo governments, that the Dissanayake regime can be pressured to implement the students' demands.

The IUSF has mobilised students under this dead-end political banner since it was formed by the JVP in 1978. The same perspective was continued by the FSP, after it broke from the JVP in 2012. The central purpose of this program is to prevent students from turning to the working class on a revolutionary anti-capitalist program.

Contrary to the IUSF, the JVP/NPP is not interested in fulfilling the "aspirations of the people." It cynically exploited the mass anger against the traditional parties of the ruling elite to win power and is now working hand in glove with the IMF and Sri Lankan big business to impose their brutal attacks on workers, students and the rural masses.

There is no national solution to the dire social problems facing students, the working class and the poor within capitalism. As the crisis of the profit system deepens, public education, health and other vital social services are the first to be targeted. This is true in the US and every other capitalist country, including Sri Lanka.

The Biden administration in the US is allocating billions of dollars for the Israeli genocide in Gaza and the NATO-led war in Ukraine and in preparation for war against China. It recently terminated federal support to schools under the Emergency Relief Fund program, which will cost 380,000 jobs of educators during next two years.

Successive Sri Lankan governments, starting with the "open market" policies of the Jayawardene government in 1977, have systematically cut funding to free public education, leading to the expansion of private schools and universities throughout the country.

The fight for free high-quality education at all levels, increased *Mahapola* support, and against the escalating privatisation of universities and schools is inseparable from the struggle against the capitalist system. This means a political fight against the Dissanayake government and its IMF policies.

The accumulated profits and billions of rupees being gouged from the working class and the rural mass, and now used to repay foreign creditors, must be made available to expand public education, health and other necessary social services.

Students must turn to the working class, the only international and revolutionary force that can take forward this struggle.

The FSP and IUSF leaders are hostile to this perspective and falsely claim students alone can pressure the capitalist government for solutions.

During the 2022 mass uprising that brought down the Rajapakse regime, the FSP and the IUSF directed workers, students and youth to support the calls of the Samagi Jana Balawegaya and JVP/NPP for an interim capitalist regime. This perspective betrayed the mass movement and paved the way for the Wickremesinghe government and its implementation of IMF austerity.

We, in the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), urge students to turn to the working class and fight for a revolutionary program based on the following policies:

- Nationalise big companies, plantations and banks under workers control!
- No to IMF austerity and privatisation! Repudiate all foreign loans!

Take forward the fight for a workers' and peasants' government, as part of struggle for international socialism. This is the program advanced by the Socialist Equality Party in the forthcoming parliamentary elections.

We urge students to join and build branches of the IYSSE at your universities, vote for SEP candidates in your district, participate in its election campaign and take forward the struggle for its perspective.

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