

Why was the Sri Lankan IYSSE meeting cancelled at Peradeniya University?

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8 January 2025

On January 3, the Vice Chancellor of Peradeniya University banned the public meeting entitled “How to fight against the IMF austerity program?” organised by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) in Sri Lanka scheduled to be held same evening. The meeting had been sponsored by the university’s Political Science Students Association (PSSA) and permission had been given by the Head of the Political Science Department.

The undemocratic banning of the IYSSE meeting by university authorities was undoubtedly carried out at the request of the new Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)/National People’s Power (NPP) government, which has ditched its election promises and fully committed to implementing the IMF’s austerity program.

The IYSSE, with the political assistance of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), immediately launched a campaign against this move and issued a public statement. We have also rescheduled the meeting, which will be held this evening in nearby Kandy.

The IYSSE campaign has evoked a serious response from a significant layer of intellectuals, academics and students, who recognise the far-reaching threat to democratic rights on campuses and have denounced it. We welcome this development, but the question remains: Why this extraordinary attack on freedom of expression? And how can it be fought?

The answer can be found in the directive issued by the Vice Chancellor’s office which demanded that the topic of the IYSSE meeting be revised “so as not to appear that the meeting challenges the government policies or else consider hereby that the above meeting be suspended immediately.”

The JVP/NPP came to power for the first time in the presidential and general elections last year by

exploiting the widespread popular anger and opposition to all the traditional parties of the political establishment, which are responsible for the economic and social crisis that erupted in 2022. During the elections, it promised to “renegotiate” the terms of the IMF bailout loan signed by its predecessor, so as to ease the heavy burdens on working people.

Having won the elections, however, the JVP/NPP leader, President Anura Kumara Disanayake, immediately declared in parliament on November 21 that his government would implement the IMF austerity program in full. Having witnessed the mass popular uprising in 2022 that forced President Gotabaya Rajapakse to flee the country, the government is acutely aware that it will face mass opposition as it implements mass sackings, a fire sale of state-owned enterprises, the slashing of basic social services, new taxes and further cuts to price subsidies.

The SEP is the only party that warned that the JVP/NPP would ruthlessly impose the IMF agenda and elaborated a socialist perspective to mobilise workers to oppose the austerity measures and fight for their basic social and democratic rights.

All the parties of the Colombo political establishment, including leftist satellites, have lined up in support of the IMF program and welcomed the JVP/NPP as the means for imposing it on working people. The fake-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), for instance, hailed the election of the JVP/NPP, advising only that it should make separate agreements with international creditors rather than dealing with the IMF—a process which would simply mean another version of austerity, quite probably even harsher.

It is no surprise that the IYSSE meeting at Peradeniya University struck a raw nerve with the government. The SEP/IYSSE has been credibly informed that the office

of Prime Minister Dr. Harini Amarasuriya, no less, who is also education minister, intervened to inquire about the lecture's purpose and format.

The ban on the IYSSE meeting is a sharp warning to workers and youth of the methods that the government will use to suppress popular opposition as it rams through its austerity program. Deep attacks on the social position of the working class cannot be imposed democratically. The government has already torn up its election promises to rescind anti-democratic laws such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act, and will not hesitate to resort to police-state measures to crack down on any and all resistance.

The IYSSE meeting tonight will discuss the political program and perspective necessary to oppose the IMF austerity measures and defend basic social and democratic rights. The dictates of global capital that the IMF is imposing in country after country, including Sri Lanka, cannot be fought within the framework of capitalism or on a national basis.

The SEP/IYSSE is fighting to build an independent political movement of the working class, rallying youth and the rural poor against the government's austerity policies. We call on workers and the rural masses to form action committees in every workplace, plantation, neighbourhood and rural area. These committees must be independent of all bourgeois parties and the trade union apparatuses.

We say to the working people that they should not sacrifice to boost the profits of big business and pay back the foreign loans taken out by successive bourgeois governments. Repudiate all foreign debt and the IMF austerity program as a whole! All major corporations and institutions, including those under threat of privatisation/commercialisation, must be placed under the democratic control of workers. The wealth of the super-rich must be seized and major banks and corporations nationalised under workers' control to provide the resources to fulfil the pressing needs of working people.

The SEP is fighting to build a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses based on democratically elected representatives of the action committees to discuss and develop the struggle for socialist policies. The aim must be nothing less than the overthrow of bourgeois rule, the establishment of a government of workers and peasants committed to

socialist policies as part of the broader struggle for socialism in South Asia and internationally.

We call on workers, young people and professionals to attend our meeting to demonstrate your opposition to the anti-democratic ban imposed on the IYSSE at Peradeniya University and to discuss this socialist and internationalist perspective.

Meeting venue: Kandyan Arts Residency Hall, Kandy
(near Kingswood College)

Date and time: Thursday, January 9, at 4 p.m.

We also call on you to condemn Peradeniya University authorities for banning the IYSSE lecture. Please send your protest letters to the university authorities, with copies to the IYSSE.

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To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact