

NSSP leader denounces Sri Lankan doctors' strikes as "medical terrorism"

By K. Ratnayake
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Wickremabahu Karunaratne, leader of the pseudo-left Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP), has publicly attacked strikes and protests by members of the Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) against the South Asian Institute of Technology and Medicine (SAITM), a private medical college.

Addressing a Colombo press conference on July 13, Karunaratne denounced the demonstrations as "medical terrorism" and called on the government to suppress the action. The pseudo-left leader played a key role in the campaign to install the pro-US Maithripala Sirisena as Sri Lankan president and has now emerged as the Colombo government's chief political policeman.

"They [the doctors] are going to terrorise this country—this is medical terror; a most barbaric terror," he told the media.

"I'm asking the government, are you going to demolish SAITM because you are frightened by them? And then they will ask for the removal [of Health Minister] Rajitha Senarathne [and] then ask to remove the prime minister ... The government should challenge and stop this kind of terror."

Karunaratne's sinister outburst came as the GMOA threatened to launch another strike demanding SAITM's closure. The union, which has called sporadic strikes and protests over the past years, says that the college does not follow the standards required to confer medical degrees and is degrading the health service.

The GMOA has no fundamental differences with the privatisation of health and education but has called the protests to deflect the mounting concerns of doctors and students. The union, together with the Frontline Socialist Party-controlled Inter University Student Federation (IUSF), claim that mass pressure will force the government to shut down SAITM.

The government faces a rising tide of agitation by workers and students. In recent weeks there have been postal and power workers demonstrations, as well as farmers' protests in response to the austerity demands of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In the war-ravaged North and East, there are ongoing demonstrations by residents demanding information about war victims, including "disappeared" people seized by military-backed thugs, and a range of other social issues.

Like President Sirisena, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and other representatives of Sri Lankan big business, Karunaratne fears this mounting wave of popular unrest is destabilising capitalist rule and is calling for repressive methods to suppress these struggles.

On June 21, the government mobilised riot police to brutally disperse university students occupying the health ministry building in protest against SAITM. Police began arresting student activists, alleging that they had damaged private property. The violent police attack was widely condemned.

Asked by the media about his attitude towards the police assault, Karunaratne said he wanted to know why the police had initially allowed the students into the building. In other words, the students should have been dispersed before they entered the building.

Karunaratne fully supports the privatisation of university education and vehemently defends the government's stand. In a statement on July 18, he declared that "having a private medical campus is good in order to prevent a massive amount of money leaving the country." He added: "Medicine should also be available as a privatised subject like other subjects. The creation of private educational institutions for the children of bourgeoisie under capitalism must be

expected.”

The N SSP leader is, in fact, parroting the government’s arguments. At a recent meeting, Sirisena insisted that having non-government educational institutions would help to stop the outflow of foreign exchange.

The government’s economic program is dictated by big business and is in line with the IMF’s demands for cuts to social spending. Karunaratne is a cheerleader of these measures, claiming it will help Sri Lanka to secure more loans at lower interest rates and relieve the country’s debt crisis (see: “Sri Lanka: N SSP leader campaigns for IMF austerity”).

The implementation of this program requires police-state methods. In late April, following sudden strike action by petroleum corporation workers, President Sirisena proposed that former army commander Sarath Fonseka be reappointed for two years in order to “discipline the country.” In response to widespread criticism, Sirisena denied making this claim. These comments did not deter Karunaratne, who endorsed the proposal and suggested the unions should work with Fonseka.

Writing in *Ceylon Today* on May 11, the N SSP leader declared: “One suggestion is that Sarath Fonseka, now a minister, could play a coordinating role as People’s Marshal in this move to ensure that essential services are not disrupted and tough action is taken in emergency situations. For this, progressive trade unions and radical people’s organizations could work with Field Marshal Sarath Fonseka.”

In other words, Karunaratne not only supports military-police methods to crush the struggles of workers and youth. He, along with his trade union and NGO supporters who helped bring this government to power, would act as shock troops under Fonseka’s command.

The N SSP leader also has insisted that the election of Sirisena as president in early 2015 was a “democratic revolution” that replaced former President Mahinda Rajapakse’s “fascistic” regime. These claims are ludicrous. Rajapakse’s autocratic rule and his communal war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were supported by American imperialism.

Washington was hostile to Rajapakse’s close relations with China and intervened to oust him.

Sirisena was enlisted as the presidential candidate with the assistance of Wickremesinghe and former president Chandrika Kumaratunga. Washington hypocritically used the Rajapakse government’s war crimes and violation of human rights as a pretext for its intervention.

Karunaratne, having already backed the bogus US-led human rights campaign in Libya and the former Yugoslavia, immediately lined up with the regime-change in Sri Lanka.

Karunaratne has a long history of collaboration with Wickremesinghe, the leader of the pro-US United National Party (UNP). Wickremesinghe and his party were the instigators of the three decades communal war against the LTTE.

Karunaratne, who has enthusiastically declared that his N SSP was in a “joint action front” with the UNP since 2008, was appointed to the 15-member National Executive Committee appointed by Sirisena after the 2015 presidential election.

Like his pseudo-left counterparts internationally, Karunaratne and his ilk are terrified of the growing upsurge of the working class in Sri Lanka and around the world. These layers are ready to back the dictatorial forms of rule being prepared by the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe regime.

Only the Socialist Equality Party, and its youth wing, the International Youth and Students for Social Equality, fight for the political independence of the working class on the basis of socialist internationalism. The reactionary efforts of the pseudo-left further highlight the enormous crisis of the Sri Lankan ruling class. We urge workers, youth and intellectuals to join the SEP and IYSSE to build the necessary leadership of the socialist revolution.

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