

# Indian government threatens to use army to break postal strike

Keith Jones  
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India's right-wing coalition government has threatened to use the army to break a nine-day-old nationwide strike by more than 500,000 postal workers.

Communications Minister Sushma Swaraj told a press conference July 15 that beginning Sunday the government will act on its threat to declare the strike illegal and use post office trainees, retired postal workers, and military personnel to move the mail. Until then, added Swaraj, 'we are not taking other steps such as terminations, transfers and arrests.'

The Joint Council of Action, which is leading the strike, claims the government has bowed to several of its demands for pay and benefit increases, but is refusing to grant the status of civil servant to some 300,000 workers classified as Extra-Departmental Employees. Management considers these workers, most of whom staff village post offices, as part-time, meaning that they are paid at a lower rate and are not eligible for many benefits.

Initially Swaraj had dismissed the strike as 'politically motivated' and vowed not to negotiate with the Joint Council of Action until the postal workers returned to work. She was forced to back down when the scale of the strike became apparent and BJP MPs began voicing concern over the strike's political impact should India be forced into an early election. According to the government's own figures, just 13 percent of postal staff reported to work on the strike's seventh day. Unions representing other central government workers have threatened to mount a work stoppage in support of the postal workers.

The strike has caused a split in the Bharatiya Postal Employees Federation (BPEF), which is allied with the Bharatiya Janata (Indian Peoples) Party--the Hindu-chauvinist party that dominates India's coalition government. On July 13, several BPEF leaders,

including its secretary-general, broke with the official policy of their organization and came out in support of the strike.

The postal strike is the first major clash between the working class and the fourth-month-old BJP-led government.

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