

Sri Lankan postal authorities victimise Socialist Equality Party member

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The Postal Department in Sri Lanka has stepped up its campaign of intimidation against Socialist Equality Party member H. Dharmasena by removing him from his supervisory position at the postal centre in Anuradhapura. Earlier this month the SEP member was informed that he was to be returned to lower duties.

The move is the latest in a series of actions aimed at silencing Dharmasena, who is an outspoken opponent of the plans of the Peoples Alliance government and the postal authority to privatise the country's postal services, slash working conditions and impose heavy job losses.

The management claimed the demotion was a disciplinary action against Dharmasena because he had left his post in the early hours of the morning on September 11. The truth is Dharmasena had become ill that morning and had sought and gained permission to leave work from his immediate shift superior.

The disciplinary action was carried out on the recommendation of N.N.D. Weerasinghe, the postmaster at Anuradhapura. The postmaster is a member of the Sri Lanka Posts and Telegraph Services Union (PTSU), which has connections with the government parties. Last April the PTSU refused to take part in overtime bans that had been imposed by postal workers to pressure the government to drop its plans.

In December last year Weerasinghe physically attacked Dharmasena and threatened him with further assaults. He was also heard saying that he would see to it that the SEP member was demoted. Dharmasena registered complaints about the assault with both the postal authorities and the police but was ignored. The police were eventually forced to carry out an inquiry and issue a warning to Weerasinghe after the SEP conducted a campaign among postal workers

demanding that action be taken.

The Union of Postal and Telegraph Officers (UPTO), Dharmasena's own union, is also directly involved in the witch-hunt against him. In fact, the local branch president, S.R. Maddavitana, attended the closed-door meeting with the Provincial Postal Director and Weerasinghe on September 28 that decided on Dharmasena's demotion. Even after receiving complaints about the branch president's role in the victimisation the union's national office has still not taken any action against Maddavitana.

Under conditions where the government is pressing ahead with its restructuring plans the postal authorities and the unions are clearly worried that the principled stand taken by Dharmasena will begin to attract wider support among the more advanced sections of postal workers.

Under pressure from the ranks, an alliance of six postal unions launched a national overtime ban and staged public protests in March and April last year. Hundreds of workers in other postal unions, who were not involved in the campaign, defied their leadership and joined in. The government responded by using its emergency regulations to arrest 12 union leaders and to dismiss 178 full-time postal workers and 600 casuals.

The unions immediately capitulated and called off the industrial action. The postal authority only reinstated the sacked workers when the unions dropped the majority of the demands over working conditions. The union leadership then agreed to serve on a joint committee along with management to formulate plans to cut costs and demonstrate that the service could be made "economically viable". The measures will mean the loss of jobs, speed-up and increased workloads.

At the same time the government is proceeding with legislation to make the Postal Department a

corporation, as the first step towards full privatisation. In January it placed the Postal Corporation Bill before parliament, but temporarily withdrew it after postal workers staged a half-day national strike. The government announced it would reintroduce the bill after the union-management committee brings down its recommendations.

Dharmasena has consistently campaigned to expose the unions' collaboration and to advance a fight to mobilise postal workers on the basis of a socialist program against the PA government and its big business agenda. As an integral part of their fight to defend their conditions, postal workers must take up the defence of Dharmasena and demand the postal authorities reinstate him to his former position and cease its campaign of harassment.



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