

Sri Lankan government delays postal corporatisation bill as workers threaten work-to-rule campaign

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The Peoples Alliance (PA) government in Sri Lanka has been forced to postpone the introduction of its postal corporation bill into parliament. The legislation aims to reconstitute the existing government postal department as a profit-making corporation—the first step towards the complete privatisation of the postal service. Two weeks ago postal workers defied emergency regulations and instituted a work-to-rule campaign. When the postal unions threatened to relaunch a work-to-rule campaign from midnight last Thursday, the legislation, which had been scheduled for debate on July 5, was shelved for a fifth time.

Media, Postal and Telecommunication Minister Mangala Samaraweera issued a statement last Thursday announcing the postponement after talks between postal union leaders and government officials. The unions had been insisting that the bill be completely withdrawn but dropped their demands and agreed to call off the campaign after the government indicated that it would delay introduction of the legislation.

Both the government and the union leaders are concerned to head off any confrontation, fearful that it could set off a wider anti-government movement. The hostility of postal workers to the planned corporatisation reflects a broader opposition to the government's austerity measures implemented at the behest of the IMF and World Bank. Living standards have further eroded over the last two months as the government has stepped up military spending following a series of advances by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in the country's long running civil war.

Agitation by postal workers against corporatisation started as hundreds of thousands of plantation workers began a two-hour work stoppage demanding a wage

hike on June 11. The stoppage was illegal under draconian emergency powers introduced two months ago. After a nine-day agitation, plantation union leaders also did a deal with employers, as signs were emerging that the protest would lead to a clash with employers and the government.

A month ago members of the Union of Postal and Telecommunication Officers (UPTO) removed the union's long time general secretary, N.P. Hettiarachchi, citing his collaboration with the government in preparing the postal corporation bill. A delegates meeting on June 4 voted 180 to 15 for the removal of Hettiarachchi, reflecting widespread hostility among members to the government's plans.

The restructuring program is largely funded by the World Bank which will provide \$US37 million out of the total cost of \$US46 million. The Director General of Public Enterprises Reform Committee explained that the new corporation would be run on “commercial principles,” claiming that the postal department had made an average annual loss of 10 billion rupees (\$US125 million) over the last ten years. Under the previous United National Party government, the lucrative business mail shifted to private courier services, which will now be legitimised as part of the deregulation of postal services.

Under the restructuring program, the new corporation will close down “unprofitable” post offices and increase postal charges sharply. The first victims will be the rural masses who even now are not receiving proper postal services. Thousands of postal jobs will be destroyed through a “voluntary retirement” scheme. To try to deflect opposition, the plan also envisages “a special pension scheme” for postal workers with less

than 10 years service.

In preparing the plan, the government deliberately sought to enrol the support of the unions. The deputy minister of post and telecommunication explained in a discussion on national television that the government had “an unprecedented dialogue for nearly one year with trade unions to seek their views and incorporate their proposals to the bill.” Last July, on the initiative of the World Bank, it set up a “tripartite committee” including representatives from government, the World Bank and the unions and made a series of cosmetic changes to the original bill in order to try to head off the opposition of postal workers.

Postal workers have showed their readiness to fight the privatisation plan since the government first proposed it in 1996. But the unions have limited the campaign to a series of pickets, work-to-rule campaigns, meetings and legal manoeuvres aimed at pressuring the government to drop its plans. At the same time, however, union leaders took part in the “tripartite committee” not to oppose the changes but to dress them up to smooth the way for their implementation.

Former union secretary Hettiarachchi's involvement in the tripartite committee angered workers and forced other union leaders to move against him. But the program of his replacement—Upali Navaratne, a member of the chauvinist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)—is no different.

When contacted, Navaratne said that while the union opposed corporatisation it accepted that the postal service had to be “restructured”. “We accept that the management should be made efficient and the department should be developed. We are not against investment coming from World Bank or anywhere. Securing investment is the government business,” he said. In the name of “efficient management” the new union leaders have already indicated to the government that they are ready to enforce increased workloads for postal workers. Last Thursday Navaratne backed away from insisting that the bill be completely withdrawn.

Moreover, Navaratne and the other UPTO leaders all supported the former secretary's participation in the tripartite committee. They only moved against Hettiarachchi after he made public his involvement while he was endorsing the corporatisation bill. At the delegates meeting called to ratify Hettiarachchi's

removal, both factions engaged in bitter verbal attacks to the point of physical confrontation. But the commotion was aimed at preventing any serious examination of the record and program of the leadership as a whole.

In particular, UPTO leaders tried to stop members and sympathisers of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) from distributing a leaflet among the delegates at the union conference. They called the police and demanded the removal of the SEP but the attempt failed. Several of the postal union delegates and workers spoke to SEP members of their disgust at the union leaders.

A delegate from a Southern Province post office said angrily: “Both factions are in a dog fight. There is no room to discuss our problems. The bill is in the parliament. It seems that the government would try to pass it using emergency laws. No one is speaking about what to do against it.”

A worker from the central mail exchange in Colombo commented: “Using the war crisis the government has imposed emergency regulations and increased the prices of essentials. The PA is doing what it was unable to do during the past period. The postal bill also has been put forward in this situation. Without talking about it union leaders are in a fisticuffs. The union is a big property for them.”

Another worker from Peradeniya in the central hill district said: “I am a member of this union for eight years. I can't see any difference between these factions in the leadership. Both are doing the same thing. It is difficult to choose between them.” He added that out of frustration some employees would leave their jobs when the department was converted into a corporation and others would lose their present rights.



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