

Postal workers defy Sri Lankan government and continue national strike

Our correspondents
23 June 2018

National strike action by over 25,000 Sri Lankan postal workers, which began on June 11 in defiance of government threats, continues to paralyse postal services throughout the country.

Four thousand postal workers protested in central Colombo on Monday and demonstrations were held in Kandy, Kegalle and other cities on Wednesday. The strikers are demanding removal of a 2006 government circular that imposes salary cuts and changes recruitment policies.

Talks between the postal unions and the Sri Lankan government collapsed on Monday after postal authorities said they needed two to three weeks to resolve postal workers' demands and insisted that the strikers return to work. The unions, under pressure from their increasingly angry members, were forced to reject this request and continue the strike. The unions have repeatedly shut down strikes over the last 12 years telling their members they should accept false government promises.

The 2006 circular introduced a new recruitment grade for postmasters and another grade for all minor staff. This created a delay in promotions and the payment of salary increments, effectively slashing workers' wages. While the circular has remained in place for the past 12 years, workers are now demanding the abolition of the system to compensate for the rising cost of living.

Postal authorities have cancelled all postal workers' leave from June 19 with Post Master General Rohana Abeyratne announcing that those who remain on strike would lose their jobs. The threat is especially directed against temporary, casual and acting-category workers.

Abeyratne also directed postal staff officers to open post offices and contact the police to protect the strike breakers. Inspector General of Police Pujitha Jayasundara has ordered police to provide "security" if

staff officers request it.

While postal workers have demonstrated their determination to defend their wages and conditions, the postal unions have isolated the strike and are desperately seeking a sellout deal with the government. The unions continue to hold talks with various government authorities, including the Salaries Commission.

Fearing that the ongoing industrial action will draw in other sections of the Sri Lankan working class and escalate out of their political control, the postal unions have instructed strikers to remain at home. Monday's mass protest in Colombo, however, was followed by demonstrations on Wednesday in Kandy, Kegalle and other cities.

The Postal and Telecommunication Officers Union (UPTO) and United Postal Trade Union Front (UPTUF) leaders are currently holding a sit-down protest outside Colombo's central mail exchange and threatened a "fast-until-death" campaign if the unions' demands are not granted. The protest is bogus, and like similar stunts regularly used by union bureaucrats across the Indian sub-continent, is an attempt to constrain the strike and divert attention from their attempts to conclude a rotten agreement with the government and postal management.

Desperate to contain the strike, the postal unions sought to put on a militant face by inviting other union leaders to address striking postal workers in Colombo on Monday.

Ceylon Bank Employees' Union (CBEU), Harbour Trade Union Front, Railway Trade Union Front, Ceylon Mercantile Union (CMU) and the Public Service Trade Union Confederation (PSTUC) officials offered their verbal solidarity but have refused to mobilise their members to back the postal workers and

challenge the Sri Lankan government.

The government assault on postal workers' wages and jobs is in line with cost-cutting "economic reforms" demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Last year a cabinet sub-committee issued a report calling for the postal department to be transformed into a "postal service" and the appointment of a separate management to restructure it. The cabinet committee wants similar restructuring measures imposed on the Sri Lankan railways and education sectors.

The postal unions have the cabinet reports, but have not informed their members about the extent and implications of the government's cost-cutting proposals.

The Sri Lankan government can only impose the IMF's economic dictates with the active support of the postal unions, which are politically aligned with the ruling or "opposition" political parties and loyally defend the profit system.

The United National Postal Union is affiliated to Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's United National Party and the Independent Postal Workers Union is controlled by President Maithripala Sirisena's Sri Lanka Freedom Party. While the UPTO claims to be "independent," it has consistently concluded sellout deals with the government.

As opposition to the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe administration and its austerity measures grows among postal workers, so the gulf between them and the unions is widening.

A postmaster from Walasmulla in Sri Lanka's south spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters. "I worked for more five years in this job," he said, "but I'm still not permanent. The trade unions now are entirely a business and the [government] circular is directly sent to the trade union leaders and implemented after their approval. They have approved it without informing us and now they tell us that we have to oppose it."

A postman from Dehiowita said workers' rights were sharply reduced under the government's new postal plans.

"The new grade system attacks our rights. Previously there were 18 minor grades but now all of them have been put into a single grade called "postal assistant." This means officers can assign us work at their discretion and we cannot oppose it. Promotions and

salary increments are also delayed," he said.

The Dehiowita postman said he had worked for the postal department for 30 years but his gross monthly wage was only 42,000 rupees (\$US262.50). After loan payments and other deductions, his take home pay was only 12,000 rupees.

"My wife is unemployed," he said "My children are still learning and so our monthly spending on them is huge and we cannot live on what I get." He told WSWs reporters that he had no faith that the unions would solve his problems.

Striking postal workers cannot defeat the government-IMF measures without a political rebellion against the unions and their pro-capitalist policies. If the postal workers' struggle is left in the hands of the unions it will be betrayed.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has called on striking workers to elect their own democratically-controlled action committees, independent of the trade unions, and fight to rally the active industrial and political support of other workers in Sri Lanka, public- and private-sector alike, and across the Indian sub-continent.

What is required is an internationalist and socialist program that fights for a workers' and peasants' government. Workers must seize control of the banks and big corporations and large estates, placing them under the democratic control of the working masses and rationally planned to serve the interests of the majority.



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