Sri Lanka: Striking postal workers criticise the trade unions

Our correspondents
26 June 2018

Hundreds of postal workers held demonstrations yesterday in several parts of Sri Lanka, including Colombo, Gampaha, Galle, Ambalangoda, Kaluthara and Trincomalee in support of their demands. The national strike of more than 25,000 postal workers that began on June 11 has now entered its third week.

The government is adamant that it will not grant the workers' demand to abolish the 2006 circular, which has affected promotion and slashed salaries. The minister of postal services, M.H.A Haleem, yesterday evening stated that a "solution" would be found today, but did not say how. Last week he attacked the strike as being "politically motivated" and aimed at "toppling the government."

On his instructions, postal authorities cancelled the leave of postal workers and threatened to sack those who failed to report for duty by June 19. The government also took a decision to deploy police at post offices. Despite these threats, however, the government failed to break the strike.

The National Salary and Cadre Commission (NSCC) told the press that the government has no money to grant the workers' demands. The NSCC declared that "it will cost the government" an additional 8 billion rupees ($US51 million), adding that granting the demands would create "complications" and anomalies in relation to other public sector workers.

The government has intensified its implementation of the economic reforms dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), including freezing salaries and the privatization of public services, including the postal department.

The Joint Postal Trade Union Collective (JPTUC) and Union of Postal and Telecommunication Officers (UPTO) are promoting the myth that workers can win by appealing to reactionary forces such as Buddhist prelates to exert more pressure on the government.

On Saturday, the union bureaucrats met the chief Buddhist prelate of Malwatta Chapter in Kandy to obtain his "blessing" for the strike. The prelate had said either unions or the government must be "flexible," meaning workers should water down or abandon their demands. The conservative Buddhist hierarchy in Sri Lanka is a major prop for capitalist rule.

The union leaders are continuing a futile "sathyagraha" or sit-in in Colombo and several outstations. Yesterday after failure of discussions with government authorities, JPTUC secretary Chinthaka Bandara said that next step would be to resort to a "fast until death." However, like the other trade unions, the JPTUC leaders are deeply hostile to any turn by postal workers to other sections of the working class.

In contrast to the union leaders' back peddling, about 15 postal workers gathered outside the Matara post office to discuss the political challenges they face with leading members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP).

After reading an SEP leaflet, the workers said the union leaders had not told them anything about the government's restructuring program. The leaflet explained that the government has prepared restructuring proposals, which have been handed to the unions, for postal services, the railways and education in line with the IMF's directives. The 2006 circular was an initial attempt to slash the postal service.

The discussion focussed on the need to fight for socialist policies and to build independent workers' action committees as the trade unions had become a barrier for any struggle for the interests of the working class.

Upali Jayathunga, a postman, said: "I joined the service in 1989. Even though I have worked for 30 years, my total monthly salary is just 39,000 rupees

© World Socialist Web Site

[$US260]. I have to pay 7,000 rupees monthly as an instalment to pay back loans from the banks. With five children, I can't cope on my salary so I am doing a security job to earn 800 rupees a day."

Jayathunga commented that the media were mostly silent about the strike and the problems faced by postal workers. "I thank your *World Socialist Web Site* for supporting us. It gives us strength," he said.

Ronal Shantha, another postal employee, said: "It is true that we need a political program for our struggle. No other organisation or media supports us genuinely like you do."

Upul Nishantha from the Ambalangoda post office told WSWS reporters that he doubted that workers could win their demands by exerting pressure on the government. "The unions say that the strike will continue until the prime minister or president will give a promise," he said. "We have got such promises in earlier strikes but nothing happened." He criticised the unions for not allowing discussions by workers about what to do or what is happening.

Shantha joined the postal service in 2007 as a porter with a basic monthly wage of 22,000 rupees ($US140). In 2015 he was promoted to postman grade, but had to work for the same salary.

"A postman's basic monthly salary is 25,000 rupees. But there are five postmen in our office that do not get the due salary," Shantha said. After deductions for loans, he receives only 21,000 rupees per month. "My mother and older sister are also living with us. We manage the family expenses with the mother's pension."

He said that several colleagues in his office had to do part-time work like driving taxies as they could not manage on their salary. "We must form action committees and discuss every issue in the struggle and develop a program to continue the fight," he concluded.

Employees from the Kandy post office also spoke to WSWS reporters and expressed their opposition to the unions. One worker said unions were putting faith in the government, saying a solution will be given, but workers have had experience with the current and previous governments. "The unions are demanding a written assurance saying it would be a guarantee. However, as in the past, this time they will also tear up such agreements."

In Chilaw, a postal worker told the WSWS: "The president or the prime minister has not said a single word regarding our demands so far. So we understand the government's position regarding our demands. We have no trust in the government's promises as we have been cheated again and again. We must join other workers to broaden our struggle."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site