Sri Lankan unions betray national postal strike

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The Sri Lankan postal unions called off a 16-day national strike by more than 25,000 workers at midnight on Tuesday. None of the demands were met. Union officials ended the industrial action without calling mass meetings after accepting vague promises made during discussions with the Postal Services Minister M.H.A. Haleem and other government officials.

The unions' demands included a revision of recruiting procedures, the re-establishment of 18 junior grades positions, permanency for officers who have been on probation for more than five years, and inclusion of deputy postmasters in the consolidated postal service.

The unions worked from the outset to limit and isolate the indefinite walkout, which began on June 11. Postal union members, however, made clear at every opportunity that they were determined to remain on strike until the government granted all of their claims.

Four thousand workers demonstrated in Colombo on June 20 and protests were held on June 25 in towns and cities across Sri Lanka, including Kandy, Matara, Galle, Ambalangoda, Hatton and Colombo.

Strikers defied threats by the government and the postal authorities. The postmaster general cancelled their leave, threatened to suspend those who failed to report for work and to stop salary payments during the walkout. The government deployed police in post offices to break the strike under the pretext of protecting employees who had returned to work.

Union of Postal and Telecommunication Officers (UPTO) secretary H.K. Kariyawasam told the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) that his union had received a "written promise" from the National Salary and Cadre Commission (NSCC). He claimed that the postal service minister had agreed to the abolition of Grade III positions, which would be integrated into Grade II positions, with salaries increased accordingly, and that there would be permanency for all officers on probation.

Kariyawasam openly admitted, however, that the union was "not sure" whether the government would fulfil its promises.

Joint Postal Union Collective (JPTUC) convenor Chinthaka Bandara contradicted Kariyawasam's comments. He told the WSWS that the government response had not been good and attempted to blame the UPTO for ending the strike.

"We were compelled to call off the campaign because the UPTO called it off. It is temporary, however, and we will continue the campaign after July 7 if the NSCC fails to give a solution by that day as it promised," he said.

Bandara's attempts to blame the UPTO, and his claim that the return to work is "temporary," are bogus.

As a recent article published in the Sinhala-language section of the WSWS warned, the postal unions were working feverishly behind the backs of their members to organise a sell-out and prevent a political confrontation with the government. This warning has been vindicated.

The various postal unions maintain a politically convenient division of labour, which is constantly used to dissipate workers' calls for a united struggle and prepare the ground for the suppression of strike action.

Over the last 12 years, these unions have systematically betrayed postal workers struggles, repeatedly shutting down industrial action on the basis of false promises from the government. The latest episode has further intensified postal workers' deep-going distrust of the government and the trade unions.

Sumanasiri, a post office worker from Hatton, told

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the WSWS: “The trade unions were preparing to betray our struggle. The workers very enthusiastically participated in the strike for 16 days. On Monday, almost 600 workers picketed in Hatton town and nearly 700 workers protested in Nuwera-Eliya on Tuesday. Tamil and Sinhalese workers were very strongly united in this fight.

“When I spoke to a leader of the postmasters’ union, he said that if we continued the struggle the government would be toppled and former President Mahinda Rajapakse would come to power. I asked him why the unions do not organise against both—the government and Rajapakse.”

These comments point to the real reason why the postal unions shut down the dispute.

The union leadership feared that ongoing national strike action would encourage other sections of the working class to walk out, leading to a nationwide movement of public sector workers against the crisis-ridden and deeply-divided Sirisena-Wickremesinge administration and its International Monetary Fund-dictated social austerity measures.

An editorial on Tuesday morning in the state-run *Daily News* had warned Colombo to quickly find a solution to the crisis and “avert a full-blown work stoppage in the public sector.” Accusing the unions of “acting at the instance of power hungry politicians,” it called on the government “to be fully alert to such machinations” and take “firm action” where necessary.

A June 24 editorial in *Veerakesari*, a Tamil daily, claimed that the postal strike was a “great burden on ordinary people” and called on the government to “mercilessly” move to “the next step”—i.e., to crush the strike. Addressing parliament last week, Postal Services Minister Haleem attacked the postal workers and claimed that the “hidden motive” behind the strike was to “topple” the government.

The government has stepped up its efforts to implement the IMF’s demands under conditions of rising foreign debt and declining export income. The depreciation of the rupee has further intensified this national economic crisis.

Contrary to union claims, the current Sri Lankan government, and any future regime, is incapable of granting the basic demands of any section of the working class, let alone the postal workers.

The NSCC told the media last week that Colombo had no funds to grant the postal workers’ demands, which, it claimed, would cost the government an additional 8 billion rupees ($US51 million) and create “complications” throughout the entire public sector.

A cabinet sub-committee has already formulated plans to restructure the entire postal service as part of the government’s restructuring and privatisation of state-funded institutions. The postal unions, which are fully aware of these measures, are colluding with the government’s cost-cutting and job destruction measures.

The government’s attacks on public sector workers in Sri Lanka are part of a social counter-revolution by capitalist governments around the world. Tens of thousands of workers have come into struggle in the US, France, Greece, Germany and India over recent months.

This month, Sri Lankan university and water board workers have demonstrated to demand increased wages and improved living conditions. Like the UPTO and the JPTUC, unions covering these workers have closed down industrial action and protests following vague government promises.

The postal workers must reject the shutdown of their national strike, break from the unions and take control of the struggle. This requires the formation of independent action committees, democratically organised and controlled by postal workers, to unite with other workers fighting to defend jobs, working conditions and democratic rights.

Such a unified struggle of the working class must be based on a socialist program for the abolition of the profit system, and the establishment of a workers’ and peasants’ government, as a part of the fight for socialism internationally.

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