

More than 27,000 Sri Lankan postal workers hold national strike

Our reporters

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Over 27,000 postal workers across Sri Lanka struck from Sunday evening to Monday midnight, crippling the national postal service that operates over 4,000 post offices. Strikers' demands included the recruitment of officer cadres from qualified employees, increase monthly overtime to 240 hours, the provision of uniforms and bicycles to junior staff, and an end to the closure of sub-post offices.

As part of increasing productivity demands, four workers are currently doing the work previously done by 16 people. Workers said that they had to do extra hours to complete each day's duties, but their monthly overtime payments are limited to just 125 hours per month. Postal workers want more overtime because they have not had a major pay rise in the recent period to compensate for rising inflation.

Postmaster General Ranjith Ariyaratne cancelled postal workers' leave for Monday and threatened to put all those who failed to report to work on "no-pay leave. He told the media that the strikers' demands were "unreasonable in view of the current economic crisis in the country."

Ariyaratne declared that the government had taken a policy decision not to recruit any new public employees and that the postal department could not appoint any new hands. Currently there are, however, about 1,700 vacancies in the department.

Mass Media Minister Bandula Gunawardana told a press briefing on Monday that postal workers overtime payments could not even be increased by 50 rupees (14 US cents) nor could there be any salary rises because of the current financial situation in Sri Lanka.

The following day, he declared that the cabinet had decided that there would be no salary rises, increased overtime payments or bonuses to any state-owned enterprise employees "until a full economic recovery is achieved."

Specifically referring to the postal service, he claimed it had been a loss-making enterprise over the years and had lost 2.5 billion rupees in 2021.

This week's walkout was called by the United Postal Trade Union Front (UPTUF), a collective of 24 unions. This includes the Postal and Telecommunication Officers' Union,

the Sri Lanka Nidahas Postal Service Union (SLNPSU), the United National Postal Workers Union (UNPWU), the Samagi Postal Workers Union (SPWU) and the All Ceylon Postal Workers Union (ACPWU).

The SLNPSU, SPWU and ACPWU are controlled by the opposition Sri Lanka Freedom Party, Samagi Jana Balawegaya and Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) respectively. The UNPWU is controlled by United National Party, which is headed by President Ranil Wickremesinghe.

The UPTUF called the strike to contain and dissipate the rising anger of postal workers over hyperinflation and increasing workloads. It did not make any specific demand for a pay rise, even though inflation has halved the real value of wages. It limited the walkout to just one day and urged strikers to stay at home in order to avoid any protest action.

In June 2018, the UPTUF betrayed a 16-day national strike by postal workers demanding better working conditions, job security and pay rises to rectify salary anomalies.

Last week, on December 8, the UPTUF released a leaflet declaring that "the benefits enjoyed by postal workers are being systematically cut and there is a possibility this will come to a high point in coming month." It then issued an empty call to workers: "Let us rise together."

The UPTUF leaflet did not mention the brutal International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity measures being implemented by the Wickremesinghe government, including sharp cuts in government expenditure, increased taxes, the privatisation of state-owned enterprises and retrenchment of hundreds of thousands of government workers. All the political parties controlling the postal workers unions support the IMF's demands.

Postal employees were among the millions of workers throughout Sri Lanka that participated in April 28 and May 6 general strikes demanding former President Gotabaya Rajapakse and his government resign, and for an end to the rising cost of living and shortages of essentials. All the unions involved diverted these national walkouts into supporting the SJB and JVP demand for an interim regime, falsely claiming it would resolve the economic and social

crisis.

Monday's national strike by postal employees is a part of a wave of rising anger by Sri Lanka workers and an international upsurge of working-class struggles.

Last Friday, thousands of Telecom and Insurance Corporation employees held a one-day strike and demonstrated in Colombo against privatisation. Thousands of public and private sector workers have also protested in several cities, including Colombo, against the government's austerity measures.

The Wickremesinghe government is rapidly moving to restructure and privatise scores of state-owned enterprises. At the top of the list are Sri Lanka Telecom, Sri Lanka Airlines, the Insurance Corporation, Petroleum Corporation, Ceylon Electricity Board and Colombo Port. It also plans to outsource postal department work and hand over its buildings and property to private companies. Privatisation of Sri Lankan postal services first began with the introduction of open market economic policies in 1978.

Notwithstanding the brutal character of this full-scale assault, the UPTUF, like the rest of the unions in Sri Lanka, is promoting the illusion that workers can win their demands by pressuring the government. It is also propagating the myth that the postal service, and workers' living standards and rights, can be defended through better management.

Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members spoke with striking postal workers in different parts of the island explaining that the government attacks on workers' wages and jobs were being driven by the global capitalist crisis.

In opposition to the efforts of the trade unions to suppress workers' struggles, the SEP explains the necessity for workers to take matters into their own hands through the establishment of action committees. To fight for workers' democratic and social rights, these committees must be built in every workplace, factory and neighbourhood, independent of all capitalist parties and the trade unions.

This week's cabinet decision to ban all wage rises or improvements in conditions "until economic recovery is achieved," makes clear that the Wickremesinghe regime is determined to impose IMF austerity and make workers and the poor pay for the ongoing financial crisis.

Only by building independent action committees can workers launch a united struggle to defeat this assault. This political struggle needs to be linked to the fight for a government of workers' and peasants' to implement socialist policies, including nationalisation of all the major industries, plantations, corporations and financial institutions under the democratic control of the working class. That is why the SEP is campaigning to build a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses based on delegates from action committees to establish the political

foundation for such a fight.

Postal workers who spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* this week denounced the government attacks and voiced their mistrust of the unions.

A postmistress in Galle said that all postal workers were angered over worsening living and working conditions.

"Because there's a serious shortage of cadre it is very difficult for us to work. We have heavy workloads. The government is reducing the retirement age to 60 years which will result in large numbers of employees leaving the postal service [from January]. The government is also trying to sell many public institutions, saying they are unprofitable," she said.

"The workers want a common struggle against the government's austerity policy," she said, adding that the trade unions were not ready to organise such a struggle. She voiced her agreement with the SEP's call for the formation of action committees independent of unions to defend workers' rights.

A postal worker at the Central Mail Exchange in Colombo explained the impact of the rising inflation on his living standards. "My monthly basic wage is 40,000 rupees (\$108). But its value has been cut in half by inflation, he said. "We have to pay off loans but now the government has also cut our overtime which helped us to earn income," he said.

"These issues are not limited to the postal department. The entire working class is facing the same conditions," he added. Referring to mass anti-government struggles in April-July, he said all workers should be mobilised for united action against the government's policies. "There are many trade unions here but workers need one organisation. Many of them are led by capitalist parties," he said.

Another postal employee said: "I've been working here for one year as a temporary worker. Our daily wage is just 1,000 rupees, which is lower than other permanent hands, but the trade unions say nothing about this situation."



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