Thousands of Sri Lankan postal workers remain on strike, defying government threats

Our reporters
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Around 17,000 Sri Lankan postal workers are continuing indefinite strike action they began on Sunday over 19 demands. The nationwide walkout which involves all ranks, apart from sub-postmasters, has virtually paralysed the country's postal services.

The striking postal workers are demanding resolution to various issues, including overtime payments, permanency for all employees in acting, substitute and labour positions, the prompt filling of all vacancies, promotions and outstanding issues in the postal transport section. They also want three wage increments for first-class officers and the removal of fingerprint machines for recording the arrival and departure of workers.

Yesterday, more than 600 striking postal workers protested outside the Central Mail Exchange in Colombo and then marched to the Presidential Secretariat where union officials presented a letter to President Dissanayake calling on him to resolve the dispute.

The strike is part of a growing wave of industrial action and the radicalisation of workers in Sri Lanka and around the world against attacks on their social and democratic rights.

Today, non-academic workers from 17 universities and allied institutions are to join a nationwide one-day strike to protest cost-cutting measures in the government's 2025 budget.

On July 22, around 16,000 workers from the Ceylon Electricity Board's 22,000-strong workforce participated in a sick-leave walkout to protest the government's plans to restructure the CEB in preparation for privatisation of the state-owned industry.

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government, which fears the postal workers' action will spread to other sections of the working class, has rapidly moved against the strike. It has cancelled postal workers' leave from Saturday, effectively making the strike illegal, and denounced the walkout as unjust.

Post-Master General (PMG) Ruwan Sathkumara told the media that the strike was "unreasonable" and falsely claimed that "many of the employees' demands have already been met." If the union leaders want a discussion with authorities, then the strike must be called off, he declared. "We are ready for negotiations. But our position is to call off the strike and come to negotiations. There is no point in negotiating while there is a strike," he said.

Postal and Telecommunications Minister Nalinda Jayatissa said that the strikes "place an additional burden on the Treasury. In the future, this could affect scheduled salary increases or overtime payments. Therefore, I consider this an unjust strike."

Replying to a journalist's question at the cabinet press briefing yesterday, Jayatissa claimed 17 of the strikers' 19 demands "have been either resolved or are being resolved, leaving two remaining demands. One of them is about overtime payments [but] we can't increase overtime payments and can't remove fingerprint machines."

He then issued a threat: "Those postal employees who agree with that can stay and the others can find jobs anywhere else."

Jayatissa's demand for strikers to drop their demands and return to work makes clear that the government is readying itself to crush the strike.

Postal workers have categorically rejected the claims of Jayatissa and the post-master general, insisting that none of their 19 demands has been addressed.

Workers have pointed out that the wage increases in the 2025 budget simply involved adding allowances to their existing basic monthly salaries. These only amounted to

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hikes of between 2,000 and 12,000 rupees ($US6.65–$US39.88) which failed to compensate for the skyrocketing cost of living.

Leaders of the Postal and Telecommunications Officers' Association (PTOA) and Joint Postal Trade Union Front (JPTUF) have called the strike, not to organise a genuine struggle for postal workers' demands, but to dissipate their growing anger over these long-standing issues. Union officials are spreading false illusions that exerting pressure on the JVP/NPP government will force it to grant postal workers' demands.

On August 13, the executive committee of the All Ceylon Sub-Postmasters' Association issued a cynical statement claiming that since four of the issues affecting the sub-postmasters included in the 19 demands had been resolved, it would not join the national walkout. "The other issues related to the strike do not directly affect the sub-postmasters and we will not be entitled to any benefits associated with the strike at the end," it said.

On Monday, a JPTUF spokesperson told the media: "We have presented our demands to several governments, 11 media ministers and three postmaster generals. Despite this, there are no solutions, which is why we decided to begin a continuous strike."

While the postal worker unions have called numerous protests and strikes, they have insisted in every case that workers could win their demands by exerting more pressure on management and governments. These protests resolved nothing, however, but only resulted in the list of demands growing longer.

The current postal workers' strike is the fourth this year, following two-day token strikes in March and May and an overtime strike on July 15–16. These strikes were shut down following false promises of a resolution by government and postal department authorities.

The union leaderships have done the same thing with this week's letter to President Dissanayake, appealing to him to intervene and resolve the dispute. However Dissanayake and his right-wing capitalist government, which is completely committed to the International Monetary Fund's austerity measures, will not change course.

The postal workers should place no confidence in the trade union leaders, who, just as they have done in the past, will betray their struggle at the first opportunity.

An article on the Sinhala-language section of the WSWS on Sunday explained, "No section of the working class that comes into struggle to defend their wages, jobs, living conditions, and democratic rights can defend or win their rights without defeating the policies of the government…

"The industrial and political strength of the working class must be mobilised to defend the postal workers' strike. Striking postal workers must turn to other workers and appeal for their active support. The defeat of the struggle of one section of workers will set the stage for attacks on all other sections."

Sri Lankan workers can only defeat the government's IMF-dictated austerity measures by mobilising their own independent strength and uniting with their international class brothers and sisters.

Postal workers must take matters into their own hands. This means establishing democratically elected action committees in post offices, operational offices and the central mail exchange, independent of the union bureaucracies and representatives of the bourgeois parties, in alliance with action committees in other workplaces, offices and the plantations.

These committees should initiate a joint struggle of the working class against the JVP/NPP government and its IMF policies, as part of the fight for a workers' and peasants' government committed to the socialist program of nationalising all banks, large corporations, estates and other key economic centres under workers' democratic control.

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