

Sri Lankan union leaders shut down postal strike

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Trade union leaders last Sunday capitulated to government threats and called off an indefinite strike by 17,000 Sri Lankan postal workers that began on August 17 and paralysed the country's postal services for seven days.

The unions caved in even though none of the strike's 19 demands—including unpaid overtime benefits, job security, workplace conditions, and the imposition of fingerprint machines—was met.

The Postal and Telecommunications Officers' Association (PTOA) and the Joint Postal Trade Union Front (JPTUF), which called the strike, repeatedly called for talks with the postal, health and media minister, Nalinda Jayatissa. The minister and postal service authorities, however, refused to grant any of the demands and instead issued ultimatums for workers to return to work.

From the outset the postal workers' strike became a major confrontation with the government of President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, which is implementing the savage austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Postal services are among the state-owned enterprises earmarked for commercialization and privatization.

The strike was the fourth industrial action called by the postal unions this year in an effort to dissipate widespread anger and opposition among postal employees. The union bureaucrats shut down all the previous actions on the basis of the government's flimsy promises. This time, the government decided to crack down.

Postal Minister Jayatissa falsely claimed some demands had already been resolved, others were under discussion, but that the demands for overtime adjustments and resolving problems with fingerprint machines were non-negotiable. He then threatened

mass sackings, saying: "Postal employees can return on these terms or else they can find jobs anywhere they wish."

After this blatant threat on August 23, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government deployed the military to break the strike. Military personnel arrived in buses at the Central Mail Exchange in Colombo to take away massive loads of mail bags, while armed police suppressed the resistance of dozens of employees blocking the entrance.

The same evening, Jayatissa told the media any talks with the trade unions would not discuss the use of fingerprint machines or the demand for overtime payments. Any discussions would focus "only" on measures to make the postal sector more profitable, he said. In other words, talks between the government and unions would be to prepare the postal service for privatization, by intensifying the exploitation of workers amid 7,000 unfilled vacancies.

On Sunday, the JPTUF and PTOA bureaucracy caved in to the minister's ultimatums. After the closed-door talks with the unions, the minister confirmed to the media that there had been no negotiations. The only understanding reached was that punitive measures such as leave cancellations would be dropped if unions accepted the government's demands on fingerprint machines and overtime.

Speaking to the media after the discussion, union leaders claimed the "strike would continue until an official letter from the Postmaster General confirmed the discussions." But as the minister announced, the unions had already agreed to end the strike. A union letter made clear that further discussions would be on the government terms and would exclude those demands that were contrary to "government policy

decisions.”

In his press conference, Jayatissa bluntly warned: “Everyone planning to go on unjustified strikes in the future must keep in mind how they were treated by people during the postal strike.” The government had conducted a vile campaign aimed at whipping up public sentiment against postal workers to justify its deployment of the army to break the strike.

The postal struggle once again starkly revealed that without a political program to defeat the government’s onslaught, postal employees—or for that matter, any section of the working class—cannot defend their basic social and democratic rights.

The unions deliberately isolated the postal strike, opposing any turn to other sections of workers to combat the government’s threats. Not a single union leader issued a call for solidarity with postal workers. In recent weeks, workers at the Ceylon Electricity Board and state university non-academic staff held limited strikes. Trade unions, however, are calling these scattered actions to divide workers and dissipate their anger.

The government plans to fully or partially privatize hundreds of state enterprises and institutions putting up to 500,000 jobs at risk. This is one aspect of the IMF’s sweeping austerity agenda imposed in return for a \$3 billion bailout loan after the Colombo government defaulted on foreign debts in 2022. The IMF measures are aimed at “debt sustainability” in Sri Lanka—that is, repayment of foreign loans and boosting investors’ profits. The government is determined to crush any worker resistance or political dissent against its pro-IMF policies.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP), from the outset of the postal struggle, warned that workers can only defeat the government’s IMF-driven austerity by mobilizing independently and uniting with other sections of workers facing similar attacks in Sri Lanka and internationally.

We call on postal workers to establish their own democratically-elected action committees in post offices, operational offices, and the central mail exchange, independent of the union bureaucracies and bourgeois parties.

These committees should coordinate with others across workplaces and plantations to lead a joint political and industrial struggle against the JVP/NPP

government and its IMF policies. We call on the working class to fight for a workers’ and peasants’ government committed to socialism, including the nationalization of banks, large corporations, estates, and key economic sectors including postal under democratic workers’ control.



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