

Sri Lanka: SEP holds online public meeting on postal workers' strike

Our reporters
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On Monday, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka held a successful online public meeting titled, “What is the way forward for striking postal workers?”

Over 80 people, including postal and other workers, as well as SEP members and supporters, participated in the Sinhala- and Tamil-language event. So far, over 1,700 people have watched the meeting video.

The meeting was one day after postal trade union leaders shut down indefinite strike action by more than 17,000 postal workers. Union officials ended the national walkout without securing a single demand, following a closed-door discussion with Postal Services Minister Nalinda Jayatissa. Last Friday, the Dissanayake government mobilised army personnel to clear a large backlog of parcels at Colombo's Central Mail Exchange.

Samitha Fernando, a postal worker and long-time SEP member, chaired the meeting. He stressed that the betrayal of the struggle once again revealed that “workers cannot place any confidence in the trade union leaderships.”

He explained that postal workers have engaged in repeated struggles over the same demands for many years. Each time, the unions have worn down workers' determination, ordering them back to work empty-handed.

Fernando reviewed the intolerable conditions facing postal employees, who are forced to do compulsory overtime without proper pay and work long hours in extreme heat and monsoon rains. Delivery staff are often required to cover vast areas on worn-out bicycles. State-issued allowances to cover basic expenses—such as bicycle maintenance and uniforms—fall far short of actual costs.

The speaker also highlighted how Jayatissa responded to the legitimate grievances of postal workers. Instead of recognising their demands, he arrogantly declared that the government had no funds to pay for overtime. Dissatisfied workers, he said, should simply “find jobs elsewhere.”

Fernando explained that the government had also threatened mass sackings, cancellation of leave and the illegalisation of trade union action. Most significantly, it threatened to withhold the August wages of striking workers.

“These measures,” he said, “are part of the broader austerity agenda dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The government's program is not to meet workers' demands but to privatise state-owned enterprises and slash public spending.”

Fernando said this reality made clear that workers could not rely on the union bureaucracy, whose entire role is to prevent genuine resistance. Instead, he urged the creation of independent action committees in each workplace, democratically controlled by workers themselves, to advance their struggle.

Delivering the main report, SEP Assistant Secretary Saman Gunadasa outlined the political significance of the strike and its betrayal. He explained how the government issued ultimatums and mobilised the police and military to suppress postal workers. Trade union officials had responded with continual calls for discussions with the minister.

“This proves that relying on the unions is a dead end—not only for postal workers but for every section of the working class,” he said. “These leaders do not fight for their members' demands. They agree with the government's policies and help implement them.”

Gunadasa traced the roots of the dispute to the IMF's austerity program. The IMF insists that public enterprises must operate on a for-profit basis, with treasury funds used, not for the social needs of the majority, but towards repaying Sri Lanka's international debt. In line with this, Jayatissa openly declared that the postal service must become profitable, justifying the curtailment of overtime payments and other cost-cutting measures.

Gunadasa pointed out that the restructuring and eventual privatisation of the postal service is part of a broader plan to privatise around 400 state-owned enterprises. While resistance is developing among employees in other workplaces, he said, the trade union bureaucracies in those sectors are also working to contain and sabotage opposition, providing the government the time and space to impose the IMF's demands.

Gunadasa placed the struggle of postal workers within the context of the broader crisis of Sri Lankan capitalism. He recalled the eruption of the 2022 mass uprising in Sri Lanka, which was triggered by the global crisis that led to an unprecedented economic calamity in the country, and how that movement—which toppled the Rajapakse government—was ultimately betrayed by union leaders and various pseudo-left groups.

“These forces blocked the development of an independent political movement of the working class, channelling mass anger behind capitalist parties such as the JVP [Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna] and their demand for an interim administration of the discredited parliamentary parties,” he said.

The JVP came to power in 2024 by making sweeping promises to address people’s grievances. The new regime, however, has been exposed as an instrument of big business and international finance capital, continuing the same austerity measures as its predecessors, he said.

Gunadasa emphasised that the political crisis of the government and the ruling elite is intensifying. He cited the unprecedented arrest of former president Ranil Wickremesinghe. This was part of the government’s desperate attempts to divert mass anger and suppress growing opposition among workers, the rural masses, and youth against its ruthless policies.

“The working class requires its own independent political program,” he stressed, and explained the SEP’s fight for workers to establish independent action committees, free from the control of the trade union bureaucracy and the capitalist parties.

These committees, Gunadasa said, should unite workers across all industries and link up with rural farmers and the oppressed masses. On this basis, the SEP is calling for the convening of a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses to fight for a workers’ and farmers’ government. Such a government would expropriate the wealth of big business and finance capital and reorganise production for social need, not private profit.

Gunadasa also emphasised the international dimension of the struggle. Postal workers in the US, Canada and the UK have recently engaged in their own battles, he said. The building of the International Workers’ Alliance of Action Committees is a necessary vehicle to unite workers globally against the assault on their rights.

The meeting concluded with a lively discussion. A northern postal worker, Sasi Kumar, said he was eager to link up with postal workers internationally. He asked whether the demands of Sri Lankan postal workers could ever be won.

Gunadasa welcomed the proposal for international

collaboration and urged the establishment of an independent postal workers’ action committee in Sri Lanka, which could then coordinate with similar committees abroad. He warned that under IMF austerity, the government will not meet workers’ demands but will instead intensify attacks on existing rights.

Another question concerned the connection between the strike and Wickremesinghe’s arrest.

Gunadasa explained that the government acted out of political desperation. Facing deepening opposition among workers and the rural poor, it sought to distract attention by arresting a widely despised political figure while continuing repressive measures against strikers. He said, “If the government treats one of its own political establishment this way, how will it deal with workers?”

Kapila Fernando, from the Action Committee of Teachers, Students, and Parents and an SEP member, told the meeting that every section of the working class faces harsh attacks. He explained how the government’s IMF-dictated attacks are aimed at destroying the public education system.

“The leaders of the teachers’ unions are no different from the postal union bosses. This points to the need for workers to take matters into their own hands,” Fernando added.

Dehin Wasantha, a non-academic worker and SEP member, expressed full support for the postal workers’ struggle and condemned government repression. He referred to the one-day token strike called by non-academic unions last week to dissipate members’ anger.

Wasantha also recalled the betrayal of the 75-day strike of 13,000 non-academic staff, which ended on July 14, 2024, without any demands being won.

“Shouldn’t we, the workers, take independent initiative to form action committees as our democratic organs? We should,” he said.

The SEP meeting ended with a clear call to action: the formation of postal workers’ action committees, the unification of struggles across workplaces and industries, and the building of the SEP itself as the mass party of the Sri Lankan working class.



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