Sri Lankan government bans railway workers from using social media

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On August 26, Sri Lanka Railways General Manager Ravindra Pathmapriya issued a circular prohibiting all railway workers from commenting on social media during "duty hours." This is the latest move in the government's escalating crackdown on working-class opposition to austerity and pro-business restructuring.

The circular came immediately after comments posted by Kasun Chamara, the Secretary of the Railway Station Masters' Union (RSMU), on its Facebook page, about long-standing problems, particularly the many technical failures on locomotives this year. The railway administration responded to Chamara's comments by asking for an "explanation."

The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna/National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government is nervous about rising discontent among railway workers and the masses of working people who depend on the railway system.

The circular prohibits workers from posting anything on social media platforms (Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, etc.) during "duty hours" related to "railway operational matters, internal decisions, official documents, security or institutionally sensitive information." It declares that sharing such information "seriously jeopardizes" the reliability of the railway service, passenger safety and institutional discipline.

The circular further states that only the General Manager of Railways and the Information Officer are authorized to provide official information about the Railway Department to external parties or the media. This calls into question whether workers and union officials are free to publicly raise issues even outside of "duty hours."

The document warns that any workers who violate these rules will face "maximum disciplinary action, including suspension from work," in accordance with Sections 737 to 743 of the Departmental Instructions Code and various other regulations.

There is widespread anger over the state of the rail network. Last year's disastrous Cyclone Ditwah caused severe damage to the Udarata (up-country) Railway, also known as the main line, impacting hundreds of thousands of passengers. Trains currently run on that route only between Colombo Fort and Rambukkana and between Nanuoya and Badulla. The service on the Matale route that passes through Kandy has been completely stopped.

The number of daily train journeys in Sri Lanka, which was previously 410, is currently limited to 184 journeys, according to S.R.C.M. Senanayake, secretary of the Engine Drivers' Union (EDU).

More than one-quarter of the roughly one million daily train passengers had used the Colombo–Kandy and Colombo–Badulla lines, but the damage—estimated by railway sources at more than $300 million—has remained unrepaired eight months after the cyclone because of inadequate funding.

Already burdened by the rising cost of living, hundreds of thousands of people, including government and private sector workers, have been forced to use more expensive and inconvenient forms of transport.

The JVP/NPP government, meanwhile, has begun restructuring State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), as exemplified by the breakup of the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) into six companies in March. The Railway Department is on the priority list among more than 400 entities identified for restructuring, as part of the IMF-dictated austerity program that the government is implementing to the letter.

Decades of underfunding and the deterioration of train services are part of a deliberate strategy to justify eventual privatization.

The union bureaucracy sought to divert workers' struggles against the restructure of the CEB into impotent negotiations with the government and into the courts. They blocked the mobilization of workers in other SOEs, including railway workers.

The RSMU and EDU leaders are following the same playbook, fearful that the attacks on railway workers could provide a spark for struggles that escape their control. The critical statements by Chamara and Senanayake did not include a single word about the IMF austerity agenda or the government's privatization program. The union leaders are seeking to portray the crisis in the railway service as merely a personal failing of the Railway General Manager, Pathmapriya.

The bureaucrats have made futile appeals to President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, the Minister of Transport and the Deputy Minister of Transport to intervene and "resolve the problem quickly." Their aim is to sow illusions in the same government that is organizing the destruction of jobs and public services, and which appointed Pathmapriya as General Manager to implement its rail privatization agenda.

Dissanayake's pledges to CEB workers at a March 13 meeting with union officials—that their jobs would be guaranteed—have already proven hollow. Five months after the formation of the electricity companies, workers have still not received legally valid appointment letters or the collective agreement promised by Dissanayake.

The social media ban is aimed at silencing rail workers and stifling opposition as the government prepares the next round of attacks on their jobs and conditions.

Social media platforms have become indispensable tools for workers to expose workplace conditions, share information about harassment by management, coordinate protests and build solidarity across workplaces. Workers and youth used social media extensively to organize the 2022 popular uprising in Sri Lanka that ousted the Gotabaya Rajapaksa government, and the uprising that ousted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government in Bangladesh.

The lesson the ruling class has learned is that workers' free communication is a threat to their rule.

The social media ban for rail workers recalls the actions of the previous right-wing government led by Ranil Wickremasinghe. In 2023, Sri Lanka Insurance Corporation (SLIC) management initiated a disciplinary inquiry against two union officials, accusing them of "using company e-mails for union affairs." The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) called on the working class to mobilize in opposition to this attack on the rights of all workers.

The JVP/NPP government, which came to power in November 2024 promising to uphold democratic rights, has continued and deepened the attacks of previous administrations. Its actions include:

- Issuing essential services orders to criminalize strikes in electricity, fuel, hospitals and 15 other sectors.
- Deploying the military and police to barricade the Colombo Central Postal Exchange to break the nationwide strike by postal workers in August 2025.
- The use of emergency powers to suppress criticism of the government on social media after Cyclone Ditwah, threatening critics with 10 years in prison.
- Introducing the Protection of the State from Terrorism Act (PSAT), broadening the meaning of 'terrorism' to include strikes, protests and dissent.
- Violent crackdowns on protests by school development officers and the arrest of student activists.

In the railway sector, successive governments have banned strikes, deployed the military against rail workers, and used essential services laws to criminalize industrial action. The social media ban is the latest attack on these workers' rights.

To mount an effective struggle to overturn this ban, the SEP calls on rail workers to build action committees, independent of the union apparatus. These committees should link up with other workers across the public sector and private industries, to organize the broadest possible struggle against the JVP/NPP government's privatizations and austerity measures, and its attacks on democratic rights.

Workers must recognize that they confront a political struggle against the capitalist system itself. The struggle for decent public services, including massive investment in railways to improve safety and provide affordable and frequent services, is inseparable from the political fight for the reorganization of society based on socialism.