

Britain: Post union calls strike over paltry wage offer at Royal Mail

Works to sell “total flexibility” to membership

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The Communication Workers Union (CWU) has announced further strike action by 130,000 postal workers to pressure Royal Mail to increase its paltry wage offer. But behind the scenes the union is working to sell the company’s Business Plan and the “total flexibility” it demands to its members.

There will be two strikes, the first from lunchtime on October 4 for 48 hours, and the second early on October 8 for a further 48 hours. The union has said there will be further weekly strikes, starting on October 15 if the dispute is not resolved.

Since the CWU leaders called off a rolling programme of industrial action at Royal Mail in August without any discussions with the membership, they have been involved in six weeks of secret negotiations in an attempt to cut a deal with the company.

Dave Ward, CWU deputy general secretary, said the strikes were a direct response to Royal Mail “inaction” since the union called off previous industrial action several weeks ago. This had led to widespread unofficial strikes that threatened to link up with millions of public sector workers fighting against a below-inflation cap on pay rises. Trade union leaders are desperate to head off a winter of discontent aimed at the government of Gordon Brown, made more urgent by increasing speculation that he may call a snap November election.

“Despite five weeks of negotiations, Royal Mail have failed to take on board the union’s message that in order for the business to succeed Royal Mail need to invest in their workforce,” Ward said.

Royal Mail said it was “extremely disappointed” the union had refused its offer of a below inflation 2.5 percent basic pay increase plus other “incentives” and complained that the decision comes after five weeks of discussions brokered by the Trades Union Congress and the government’s arbitration service ACAS. It warned, “We have been negotiating with the CWU over pay and flexibility since March 2007 and, as a result of the CWU decision to return to strike action, we will now begin to make the changes that we have been discussing with the union and our people for many months.”

The CWU’s move to close down the previous round of strikes reflects the demands of the media, the Labour government and big business. The *Daily Mirror*’s Paul Routledge urged the CWU to act responsibly and end the strikes and accept a below the rate of inflation pay settlement so that postal workers did not suffer the same fate as the miners in the 1984-85 strike—the decimation of their industry. He said, “To those who say I am betraying the posties, let me say this: I backed them from day one. I was on the picket line on June 29. I gave them money. I believe that support enables me to tell the unpalatable truth today. Besides, I don’t need lessons from Trotskyist hotheads who’d keep them out for ever.”

The Royal Mail has made it clear that the pay deal is conditional on all the flexibility proposals being implemented. It was only because a document detailing the full extent of the changes was leaked that they even became known. Reading them reveals why post workers were kept in the dark. They represent a major escalation in the war of attrition that Royal Mail, with the complicity of the CWU, has mounted against post workers’ hard-won working conditions over the last 30 years.

The document calls for “a mature relationship” that would lead to “managers, trade unions and employees working together to create a responsive and agile organisation, which can react to customer needs and difficult operational circumstances.” It says Royal Mail and the CWU have agreed that in order to achieve these aims “an unprecedented focus” is required to drive up the efficiency of the operation and the productivity of post workers.

Under the deal, managers can tell workers to cover any job they are trained for at any time and discipline them if they refuse. Annualised hours will be introduced, requiring postal workers to work less in the summer but more at busy periods such as Christmas. The number of hours worked each day will be increased or cut according the work available, with only seven days notice given for changes. Weekend working will be cut, leading to a loss of up to £120 a week in pay, night shifts stopped (with up to £80 a week lost) and Sunday collections ended. Door to doors (mass junk mailings) are to be increased

from three to five per week, with no extra payment or possibly no payments at all.

Royal Mail also wants to change the redundancy arrangements in the Managing the Surplus Framework agreement to reduce payouts and slash pension provisions, which includes raising the retirement age to 65 after 2010 and excluding new employees from the final salary scheme.

Far from being guilty of “inaction” over the last few weeks, as Ward claims, the employers at Royal Mail and in other areas of the postal service have stepped up their attacks. They have put notices on post boxes announcing the end of Sunday collections, implemented a rolling programme of post office closures (the first 200 of an estimated 2,000) and stepped up outsourcing of town centre Crown post offices to the newsagent WH Smith.

Last week Royal Mail revealed plans to close the Oxford Mail Centre, one of the most militant in the country, and centralise operations at Swindon by 2009, resulting in the loss of 430 jobs. This follows the announcement last year that work at the Reading Centre will also move to Swindon, leading to 300 job losses.

Disciplinary action has been taken against workers who refuse to do new duties. Last week in Watford managers called police to remove 12 workers who sort the post, accusing them of taking unofficial industrial action because they refused to deliver letters instead—a job for which they say they are untrained and unsuited.

Alan Walsh, a CWU representative at the office, said, “I don’t know why they are doing this. There are people here already who are delivery trained who are being told to stay in the depot—it defies all logic.

“It’s ridiculous that they called the police in. Surely they’ve got better things to do. I’ve been here for 20 years and I’ve never seen anything like this in my life.

“We’ve got one guy here who is 63 who was sent out on deliveries yesterday with about 13 or 14 pouches of mail. It makes no sense what they are doing.”

What Royal Mail is doing makes perfect sense if one sees the latest attacks as the culmination of the decades-long process of CWU collaboration with privatisation of postal services, beginning with the sell-off of the telephone services in the early 1980s. In 1986, in collaboration with the Conservative government of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, the CWU ensured that the Post Office was split into four separate businesses—one of which, the Royal Mail, was further restructured in 1992, reducing 64 postal districts to nine divisions, with significant job losses.

In 1997 the European Union passed a directive, amended in 2003, that demanded each member nation state open up its national postal services to full competition by 2009 (now delayed to 2010). So far Sweden, Britain and Finland are the only EU countries to have scrapped their postal monopolies completely, with Germany and the Netherlands planning to do

so in January. In order to gain an advantage over its rivals in the struggle to win a slice of the €88 billion European postal market, the Labour government’s trade secretary, Peter Mandelson, put forward a new commercial structure in 1999 involving “the most radical set of reforms since the modern Post Office was created in 1969.” Close to 70,000 jobs have gone in the last decade and a further 40,000 are under threat if the new agreement is imposed.

This destruction of working conditions is the bitter result of the collaboration of the trade unions with the Labour Party and its brutal free-market policies since it came to power 10 years ago. Labour’s Health Secretary Alan Johnson was a former national secretary of the CWU and the entire CWU leadership are senior members of the Labour Party, except for a few radical left hangers-on. Some of the key policies on the privatisation of the post had their origins within documents prepared by the CWU bureaucracy.

Over the years postal workers have shown enormous determination in the fight against low pay, privatisation, the continual attacks on working conditions and the disciplining of colleagues by management.

As it has done on every occasion in the past, the CWU bureaucracy is sabotaging that fight once again. Reports that the union has lost 19,000 members since the strike action first started and widespread criticism of CWU General Secretary Billy Hayes on post worker Internet forums and blogs are indications that growing numbers of workers realise the bureaucracy has led them into a blind alley.

However, that opposition must be focused into a political rebellion aimed at mobilising the entire working class against the pro-capitalist policies of the CWU bureaucracy and its alliance with the Labour government. Postal workers must reject the new contract agreed behind the scenes between Royal Mail and the CWU leadership. This is the first step in drawing the necessary political lessons from years of treachery by the CWU bureaucracy.

Rank-and-file bodies must be set up to take the conduct of the strike and any and all actions in defence of jobs and conditions out of the hands of the union apparatus. A campaign must be waged to establish links with other struggling workers in Britain and with postal workers throughout Europe in particular. The most important step, however, is the need for a new political leadership—the Socialist Equality Party—based on a socialist and internationalist perspective that aims to bring under genuine democratic control such essential services as the Royal Mail.

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