

Britain: Postal workers vote for national strike

By Robert Stevens
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Postal workers in Britain voted Thursday for national strike action in their ongoing dispute with the state-run Royal Mail. Members of the Communication Workers Union (CWU) voted to strike by a majority of 76 percent. In a ballot turnout of almost 80,830 (67 percent of the national workforce), 61,623 endorsed industrial action, with 19,207 voting against.

Royal Mail is imposing numerous attacks, including changes to working practices as well as pay cuts and job losses. Attacks have included drastic speed-ups and increased workloads. Managers have already imposed route revisions and shift changes.

According to some estimates, Royal Mail plans to cut its wage bill by up to £470 million a year, with as many as 16,000 jobs threatened. Earlier this year, an internal document from Royal Mail was leaked to the media that stated, “We have a requirement to cut a minimum of 10 percent from our cost base, including people costs.”

This onslaught is the latest phase in the restructuring of the Royal Mail, prior to its planned part-privatisation under proposals introduced by the Labour government of Prime Minister Gordon Brown. Since 2002, the Royal Mail Group, which employs around 180,000 staff, has shed 50,000 jobs.

To date, the CWU has done all it can to avoid having to call a national strike. Rather than call out its 120,000-strong postal worker membership, there has been a 15-week campaign of rolling stoppages around the UK.

Postal workers at hundreds of depots and sorting offices around the UK have been divided from one another and been engaged in sporadic, localised strike action. Postal workers have been divided up by area before being called out on strike “unit by unit.” As a result, for nearly four months, workers at more than

230 separate Royal Mail facilities, including night offices, distribution centres and mail centres, have been called out in *separate* strikes for at most 24 hours.

According to the *Daily Telegraph*, since June 19, “postal workers have been on strike somewhere in the country once every other day.”

These isolated and limited strikes were only called by the CWU in order to quell the developing anger of postal workers in the face of continuing attacks on their pay and conditions. Prior to the first rolling strikes being held, the union admitted that it was forced to assign additional staff to deal with local branch requests to hold strike action. By July, such requests had been made from nearly 500 local areas.

Despite the best attempts of the CWU to keep these strikes under control, a significant number of unofficial strikes have also taken place in various towns and cities. Last month, staff at the Glasgow Mail Centre in Scotland took unofficial action on several occasions. They were immediately supported by co-workers at 12 other delivery offices in the city and in the local towns of Paisley and Ayr. The unofficial action by the Glasgow West workforce was a clear example of the divisive role being played by the CWU. The workers took unofficial action after being sent home without pay for refusing to cross a picket line of their striking colleagues.

The CWU has constantly sought an accommodation with Royal Mail, offering a no-strike deal on several occasions in return for negotiations with itself on “modernisation.” Calling the national ballot, CWU General Secretary Dave Ward stated that the union had made “genuine offers of no-strike deals...guaranteed” to management, and their own request in return was to “stop the arbitrary attacks on your jobs and your terms and conditions.” Hayes calls the vote “a referendum

about your future,” but again stated “that future is a successful modernised Royal Mail.”

The threat of a strike is only a bargaining chip, as far as the CWU is concerned. Announcing the vote, Ward said that the union did not want to see a national strike and “that we regret very much that it has come to this situation.” He said that we “are prepared to give the company a final opportunity before any strike action becomes necessary” and that the CWU would continue to seek a negotiated settlement over the next 10 days.

Ward said that what was now required was an “agreed roll-out of real modernisation.”

In response to the ballot result announcement, Mark Higson, Royal Mail’s managing director, called on the union to implement its policy of a “strike-free moratorium.” “The union has repeatedly offered a strike-free moratorium. We call on the union to honour that commitment,” Higson said.

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