

# British postal workers to hold strike ballot to defend jobs and conditions

By Steve James  
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Some 110,000 British postal workers at Royal Mail are balloting between September 24 and October 15 on industrial action in defence of jobs and working conditions. The vote, official notice of which was served the Communication Workers Union (CWU) on Wednesday, is likely to return a resounding majority for a national strike.

The Royal Mail dispute takes place amid a resurgence of the class struggle internationally. At the same time that postal workers are balloting, more than 120,000 lecturers, academics and other staff at 147 UK universities nationwide are being balloted for strike action in separate ballots in defence of pension rights and jobs and in pursuit of better pay. In the United States, 46,000 GM autoworkers have been on strike since midnight Sunday.

The CWU leadership authorised the ballot because it senses the immense opposition building up to attacks on jobs and conditions by the Royal Mail Group (RMG). In recent years, workers have launched local, unofficial walkouts at a number of depots against management bullying and cost-cutting.

RMG's moves are directed by the financial markets and the company's major shareholders. The company's shares, at one stage trading at 632p, are now worth 226p—far less than the 330p value set at privatisation.

RMG's intention is to increase profitability through a five-year restructuring plan aimed at splitting its Parcelforce parcel delivery from the traditional postal service. Postal workers face the introduction of “gig economy” conditions prevailing across the parcel delivery industry, while a planned review of the Universal Service Obligation threatens six-day week postal deliveries and could lead to the axing of as many as 20,000 jobs.

The CWU apparatus, however, has no intention of pursuing a determined struggle in defence of its members. Rather, as has repeatedly been the case, the trade union bureaucracy's primary goal is to restore close working relations with RMG management. These broke down following the appointment last year of Rico Back as the company's CEO, in place of his predecessor Moya Greene.

Royal Mail lost its historic monopoly on postal deliveries in the UK in 2003 and was privatised 10 years later. As part of this process, the Post Office was hived off as a state-owned retail arm, while Royal Mail was left with responsibility for delivery of letters and parcels. Privatisation, forced through against postal workers' wishes, was possible only because the CWU refused to take up any meaningful struggle against the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government, which pushed it through.

Opposing the sellout, the WSWS said at the time: “The CWU has stated that it cannot legally take action over privatisation. Insofar as the CWU has any strategy outside verbal denunciations, it has been limited to sending postcards to Members of Parliament and the CWU-supported ‘Save our Royal Mail’ campaign.”

In contrast, nearly 80 percent of postal workers voted for strike action, implicitly rejecting privatisation—a stance that, had it not been betrayed, would have won massive support from workers at a time when the government was deepening its programme of mass austerity.

Instead, when the newly privatised company finally floated on the Stock Exchange, the 150,000 or so remaining postal workers were handed 10 percent of the company's shares so that they could participate in the destruction of their own conditions. Ever since, RMG management has intensified postal workers' exploitation in line with the demands of the institutions holding the bulk of the group's shares.

In 2014, the CWU promoted the company's “Agenda for Growth, Stability and Long-Term Success,” which, in return for a nominal pay increase, allowed Royal Mail to employ some workers on the basis of single-hour, part-time and temporary contracts. A planned strike was called off, as the new agenda satisfied the CWU's overarching aim of maintaining a close relationship with management.

In 2017, over 90 percent of CWU Royal Mail members voted to strike against the company's attempt to close down their defined benefit pension scheme, which had 90,000 members and offered reasonable retirement benefits for

postal workers. This time the strike was called off at the last minute following a court decision, which the CWU refused to mobilise against. The CWU cut a new deal—the so-called Four Pillars Agreement (4PA) with management, under whose terms a new and inferior pension scheme was introduced.

The 4PA also set out the terms for the CWU and RMG, working in close collaboration, to prepare RMG for what they termed the “Fourth Industrial Revolution” of automation, short-term, zero-hour and self-employment contracts. The agreement proposed decreases in working hours, without loss of pay, in return for set increases in productivity through alterations to some 60,000 delivery routes, en route sorting of mail by postal workers, new duty patterns and greater use of PDA (personal digital assistant) devices.

But the cost savings and productivity increases achieved under 4PA are not enough for RMG management and the financial markets. This month, the *Financial Times* quoted industry analyst David Kerstens as saying: “It has become too expensive for Royal Mail to honour that agreement... they are targeting productivity improvements of 15 to 18 per cent.”

Hence the appointment of Rico Back, formerly the founder of German Parcel, then the manager in charge of GLS, RMG’s own international parcel delivery network. Formed in 1999, GLS now operates across Europe and has bought up delivery companies in North America. It contributes most of RMG’s profits and has around 17,000 workers worldwide. A recent undercover documentary by writer and undercover journalist Günter Wallraff exposed working conditions at GLS in Germany. Drivers for GLS contractors work 13- and 14-hour days for around €1,000 a month, with some breaking traffic laws and driving while exhausted to fulfill impossible schedules.

In 2016, hundreds of parcel delivery workers in Italy struck at GLS and its subcontractors against insecure contracts and low pay. One striker, Abd Elsalam Ahmed Eldanf, was run over and killed by a vehicle driven by a strike-breaker. When the authorities and media described the death as an “accident,” the strike spread to all GLS offices in Italy.

Back’s appointment has infuriated the CWU, not because of his company’s role in the death of Abd Elsalam Ahmed Eldanf or because of GLS workers’ conditions across Europe, but because he has compromised the CWU’s cosy relations with RMG management. Until now, the CWU has kept silent about GLS, fearful of a united struggle by postal and delivery workers across Europe.

CWU General Secretary Dave Ward complained recently in *Tribune* magazine that, following Back’s appointment,

“there have been three major announcements that will significantly hit staff without any discussion with the union—despite our agreements requiring proper strategic engagement.”

In other words, the CWU’s position is that major attacks on postal workers’ conditions should be negotiated through the CWU. It envisages that as soon as the previous close relations can be re-established, any dispute will be closed down by the union.

To oppose the ongoing destruction of their terms, conditions and livelihoods, postal workers must turn to the creation of new, democratic rank-and-file organisations of struggle. These organisations must start from the interests of postal workers and service users rather than the profit requirements of Royal Mail and the pro-capitalist maneuvers of the CWU bureaucracy.

Rank-and-file groups should be set up in every delivery and sorting office and immediately turn to all workers—part-time, full-time and zero-hours, union and non-union—across all RMG’s British and GLS’s European and international operations, based on a socialist programme. They should seek support from workers employed by delivery firms including Yodel, Hermes, UPS, FedEx and Deliveroo. RMG workers should turn to the broadest sections of working people in their communities, all of whom face the same crushing pressures on their living standards and the destruction of working conditions won over decades of struggle.

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