

UK: Bootle Royal Mail workers' strike sold out by Communication Workers Union

By Robert Stevens
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An unofficial strike by Royal Mail delivery workers against management racism was sold out yesterday by the Communications Workers Union (CWU), after a scabbing operation enforced by the police.

The strike by around 50 postal workers at the Bootle and Seaforth delivery office in Merseyside began October 2 after they walked off the job to protest a racist comment by a manager against a Muslim co-worker. The worker left work and remains off on sick leave.

The principled action by the workers sharply cut across the anti-immigrant nationalism being spewed out in ruling circles. They soon enlisted the support of delivery drivers at the Warrington mail centre and another office, with workers walking out in solidarity after refusing to cross the picket lines at Bootle. The Warrington office is one of the major sites of Royal Mail and distributes post across the north west of England.

With the strike threatening to expand and the CWU not officially in control, management launched its scabbing operation. During Tuesday morning at the Bootle depot, scab labour was bussed in from all over the country, walking in under police protection.

The CWU instructed strikers to step aside and not to obstruct the main gate, citing anti-union laws. A voice on a video of events can be heard explaining that, as the strike is unofficial, the strikers are unable to obstruct the entrance to the Royal Mail facility to stop scabs going in.

Under employment law, companies are not allowed to use an employment business to supply labour if this is to replace an employee who is taking part in either a strike or industrial action short of a strike. This is not the case with an unofficial strike where workers have walked out without being balloted by a recognised trade union. Under the Trade Union Act 2016, staff can only take industrial action after a bureaucratic and secret ballot process aimed at suppressing industrial action.

Later Tuesday evening, an injunction was served on the CWU by management. This was granted to Royal Mail, with the strike ruled illegal by the Royal Courts of Justice. The CWU did not publish the ruling or oppose it, once again utilising anti-strike laws to suffocate and strangle a stoppage. A return to work was ordered without the demands of striking

workers being met.

The *Liverpool Echo* reported Wednesday, “The development, relayed to the picket line this morning at around 7am, was not well received, it is understood.” It added, “Sources said many postmen and women were ‘unhappy’ with the strike being halted.” The *Echo* reported, “The CWU wanted the female manager at the centre of the dispute to be moved to a different office, but that request has not been authorised.”

From the start of the dispute, the CWU sought to isolate the strike—fearing action could spread under conditions in which a national ballot of all postal workers is under way. It posted no news of the Bootle strike on its website or Twitter page, with branches across the country kept in the dark even as the strike spread to Warrington and, as one postal worker in that town said last Saturday, “More and more offices up and down the country are also walking out” in different disputes.

Following the Warrington walkout, a Royal Mail spokesman told the *Warrington Guardian*, “We remain committed to resolving our colleagues’ concerns in cooperation with the Communications Workers Union (CWU).”

The CWU’s betrayal of the Bootle strike exposes the phony character of its official national strike ballot campaign. The CWU only organised the strike ballot after management stepped up its offensive against staff in recent years, with attacks on their terms and conditions that have resulted in a plethora of unofficial walkouts by sorting and delivery staff. Constant Royal Mail management bullying and harassment in order to enforce its diktats has seen walkouts at Swindon, Scarborough, Hamilton, Cambridgeshire, Canterbury, East London and Carmarthen, among others.

The union’s sole real concern is with losing its place at the top table with management and being bypassed as Royal Mail looks to streamline its operations with the loss of up to 20,000 jobs in the pipeline.

The central role in disarming workers in the dispute was played by the pseudo-left Socialist Workers Party (SWP). On Wednesday, they responded to the defeat of the strike with the type of cynical commentary they offer up after every sellout carried out by the union bureaucracy.

“The union leaders should have escalated and broadened the strike, not backed off,” the SWP politely suggests. “There

should have been mass pickets at Bootle, and solidarity walkouts. ... It was wrong to back off in Bootle.”

Yet as the strike started, the SWP had hailed CWU General Secretary Dave Ward for declaring that “the national campaign to win a strike vote against Royal Mail attacks ‘has made me prouder than ever to lead the union’.”

“A new era of trade unionism is being born and we stand at the forefront of it,” quoted the SWP. If there is a “new era,” it will be one in which the CWU and the other union bureaucrats—including many SWP members—will plumb new depths in selling out workers in the service of management.

Even as it reported the betrayal at Bootle, the SWP’s article declares, “All the signs are that a hugely energetic campaign will deliver a very big vote for strikes [in the national ballot]—well over the Tories’ 50 percent turnout threshold. It must then be turned into effective action as soon as possible.”

The type of offensive being prepared by Royal Mail is clear from its response to the Bootle strike. It will use the courts, police and management to introduce a draconian regime of harassment and intimidation aimed at ramming through a major restructuring of jobs, wages and conditions. The CWU will also respond in the same manner as it did at Bootle.

Workers must prepare for the coming fight against Royal Mail by taking matters into their own hands and establishing rank-and-file committees, independent of the CWU. On this basis, a national strike of *all* employees could be the spearhead to mobilise workers throughout the entire delivery workforce beyond Royal Mail such as Amazon.

The rank-and-file committees should raise the demand for the nationalisation of Royal Mail under workers’ control. The parasitic grip of the corporate shareholders and senior management must be broken and the resources of Royal Mail used to benefit the workforce and the public.

The Socialist Equality Party spoke with some of its supporters from Royal Mail about their response to the dispute at Bootle.

A **London** postal worker said, “Clearly, Royal Mail has been preparing this showdown with postal workers for years. There has been a systematic campaign of bullying and harassment throughout the country. This has provoked unofficial action in order to defend our pay and conditions, but we are not the only ones. Workers around the world are facing the same attacks. The GM workers’ fight in the United States is our fight as we face a common enemy. The problem we face is that the CWU has been in bed with management for decades, it’s the same everywhere. If we go into this national strike under this leadership, it will fail with devastating consequences. We need to take the impending strike out of the union’s hands and into our own.”

A postal worker in the **Solent** area said, “There has been growing unrest in my office alone due to the management hammering away at people’s overtime and forcing the staff to

stay out longer on delivery to finish the work by using part-timers to mop up the job when the staff can’t complete the [delivery] walk, thus robbing them of the overtime. In my office, there is great support for this coming strike, as the staff have just had enough and want the Royal Mail directors to change the working conditions that were promised to the staff through the Four Pillars Agreement.

“In the walkout in a Bootle delivery office over racism, we are seeing a trend all over the country in managers trying to assert a dictatorship over the staff with impunity and not being brought to account for their actions, and the CWU have decided not to act when situations like this happen, as this allows more control over its members.”

A postal worker from the **South of England** said, “There has been little mention of the strike at Bootle in my office. I found out about the strike from the *World Socialist Web Site*. I raised it with others, but only those who had seen it on social media were aware, even after other offices in Cheshire and the North West had taken solidarity action.

“The CWU at my office dismissed it as a local dispute up north. Even the reason for the strike—a racist comment by management to a Muslim worker—was neither here nor there to them.

“I’ve been a postman almost a decade now. I joined just after the last official strike [in 2007]. Everyone says everything is getting worse, yet there hasn’t been any official strike action, even against privatisation.

“The CWU is only making a big thing this time because Royal Mail leadership are excluding it from any decisions. I’ll be very surprised if this ballot doesn’t return a massive majority for strike action. What Royal Mail wants will be catastrophic for postal workers and their families and those that depend on the service we provide.

“A lot of the unofficial local walkouts seem to be over local management bullying and firings, but those incidents arise because of the extra work being piled on so that local managers can get their bonuses and Royal Mail rake in more profits.

“The Bootle strike makes me proud to be part of the same workforce, especially with today’s political climate with Boris Johnson, Brexit, Tommy Robinson, Trump, etc. It is an amazing example, in a genuine tradition of class unity and struggle.”

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>