

UK's Royal Mail seeks legal action to prevent postal strike

By Robert Stevens
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Royal Mail Group (RMG) has made an application to the High Court to prevent a strike by postal workers. The hearing is expected Tuesday, with Royal Mail claiming there were “potential irregularities” in the ballot by the Communication Workers Union (CWU). It wants the ballot ruled “unlawful and, therefore, null and void.”

Last month, over 110,000 postal workers returned a record 97 percent strike vote in defence of jobs, working conditions and the postal services. Parcelforce members also delivered a 95 percent strike vote across two separate ballots. The turnout in the ballot was 76 percent.

The company is seeking to have the ballot ruled illegal on the spurious basis that postal workers were “being encouraged [by the CWU] to open their ballot papers on site, mark them as ‘yes’, with their colleagues present and filming or photographing them doing so, before posting their ballots together at their workplace postboxes.”

RMG claimed it had submitted “substantial evidence” to the High Court from at least 72 of its sites where this occurred.

The firm issued a statement Friday declaring “until CWU has conducted a lawful ballot, which results in a vote in favour of industrial action, it will not be able to serve notice of any action on Royal Mail.”

As part of a resurgence of working class struggle internationally, the Royal Mail strike ballot was followed by tens of thousands of higher education staff who voted to strike in defence of pay, conditions and pensions. Strikes are ongoing or are to take place among other education workers and those employed in the health sector and on the rail network.

The legal case is just part of Royal Mail's efforts to defeat a struggle by over 100,000 workers. It is also

recruiting a scab labour force. Following the ballot result, postal workers discovered that Royal Mail had placed adverts for more than 6,000 jobs at sorting offices and depots nationwide. These are advertised as temporary jobs for delivery drivers and warehouse operatives and are separate from the thousands of casual staff recruited every year during the Christmas holiday season to deal with the huge increase in mail and parcel volumes.

Royal Mail is putting forward war plans under which it intends to impose conditions that are now widespread throughout the “gig economy.” Its eCourier subsidiary—a same-day delivery company based in London—classifies its workers as “independent contractors.” They have no set pay or hours, receive no holiday or sick pay and are not enrolled in a pension scheme. Last month, eCourier members of the Independent Workers' Union of Great Britain walked off the job for two days to demand recognition as full employees, to be paid the London Living Wage and for the company to enter into a collective bargaining agreement.

Royal Mail moved to legal action against the CWU after offering discussions “without preconditions”—provided, that is, the union gave a “binding commitment” to remove the threat of walkouts over the festive season! Under legislation governing industrial disputes, the mandate for a strike following a successful ballot lasts for six months.

The CWU was fully prepared to meet to discuss these issues, but said the timescale for negotiations was too narrow. “[Royal Mail] refused to meet last week and offered just 4 hours today,” the union complained.

The CWU was forced to rebuff these overtures as the union faces militant opposition among postal workers. This sentiment was represented in both the

overwhelming strike vote and a series of unofficial strikes over the last year against management demanded speedups, bullying and racism.

CWU officials have done everything possible to avert industrial action since the ballot result was announced. They were in mediation talks for weeks before the strike vote result was known and continued talks afterwards. By the end of October, there had been seven weeks of talks. Even under the strict anti-union laws, it could have called off mediation talks on the day of the ballot and given the company 14 days' notice of its intention to strike. Instead, CWU General Secretary Dave Ward announced that the union would not call strikes but instead "speak to those individual shareholders and explain to them there's a better role for postal workers going forward that can make this company very successful."

The main aim of the CWU has been to use workers as a bargaining chip to preserve what they term the "progressive" Four Pillars Agreement (FPA)—which was the stated aim of the strike ballot. The FPA, signed in 2018, was a sellout and included an inferior pension scheme, reduction in working hours in return for productivity boosts through alterations to delivery routes, new duty patterns, new working practices and greater use of technology, including PDA (personal digital assistant) devices to monitor performance. But even this is not enough for Royal Mail. Under conditions of mounting global competition in the parcel delivery market, it is seeking changes to the deal centred on productivity hikes of up to 18 percent.

The CWU is doing nothing to alert its members to the gravity of the situation. Workers are in a war against Royal Mail and involved in a political struggle against the capitalist state, its government, courts and police.

Terry Pullinger, the union's deputy general secretary, said earlier this week, "I don't think there is absolutely any doubt whatsoever that we will be giving [the company] notice and we will be taking industrial action through the build-up to Christmas and through the period up to the general election," with the possibility of industrial action on Black Friday (November 29) and Cyber Monday (December 2) "in the mix."

But all such talk was shelved by Friday. The union insisted it only wanted more negotiations and would be willing to hold talks this weekend. Interviewed by *Sky News* on Friday, Ward said, "We're not people who

want to disrupt the general election. We're not people who want to disrupt Christmas... We didn't call this on... we don't actually want a strike, we want an agreement where the company will get back what they previously agreed."

The CWU is working hand in glove with Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn to ensure that no widespread action takes place. Their greatest fear is that under conditions of a general election, with millions of workers prepared to fight to end the relentless assault on their social position, Corbyn could come to power on a wave of uncontrollable workers' struggles.

Asked if he would call off the dispute if asked to by Corbyn, Ward replied, "I'm not here to represent the Labour Party. I'm here to represent postal workers. We haven't even announced strike action yet. We've been going through a process of mediation. We've been trying to get the company to come to their senses."

The CWU will hold an executive meeting next Wednesday, the day after the High Court hearing. There should be no doubt the union would call off any strike that was ruled illegal.

The central issue facing postal workers is to take the struggle out of the hands of the CWU and form rank-and-file committees of action, independent of the union. Workers cannot wait until the court pronounces its verdict on whether they can strike. Walkouts must be organised immediately and linked up with other workers throughout the delivery and communication industry and with all other employees fighting back against the onslaught of the ruling elite.

The author also recommends:

The expanding UAW corruption scandal and the case for rank-and-file committees

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