

Communication Workers Union folds 48 hours after Royal Mail threatens 20,000 jobs

By Thomas Scripps
2 May 2020

On Wednesday, Royal Mail Group (RMG) announced plans to scrap Saturday letter deliveries from May 2 until further notice, putting 20,000 jobs at risk.

In less than 48 hours, having initially threatened strike action, the Communication Workers Union (CWU) organised a shameless retreat.

Speaking on a live video conference yesterday evening, General Secretary Dave Ward and his deputy Terry Pullinger announced that, after meeting with the Conservative government, the industry regulator and Royal Mail, the union had “secured correspondence... that this is now definitely only a temporary change.”

Ward said company CEO Rico Back “has made it clear that there will be no job losses” and that “duty changes on a temporary basis will be voluntary and negotiated on a local basis.” He claimed that “all parties are now accepting that this temporary change is only linked to the... coronavirus pandemic.” Therefore, no industrial action is going ahead.

This miserable surrender was touted as a “major breakthrough”, made possible, Ward said, by a “fantastic response from the public” to Postal Workers’ Day on Wednesday—“I have to say including over 50 Tory MPs who have done videos in support of postal workers (!)”.

Ward and Pullinger were even more thrilled at the possible intervention of Britain’s 94-year old monarch in support of their triumphant exercise in labour relations, with Ward saying, “It’s entirely possible the queen has intervened.”

Workers are dealing with an organisation that has renounced any connection with the social interests of its members and will not fight the employers under any circumstances.

Who do Rico Back and the CWU think they are

kidding? Claims that Royal Mail’s action is temporary and motivated solely by the pressures caused by the pandemic are lies and the CWU know this very well. RMG has been seeking to undermine the Universal Service Obligation—guaranteeing six-days-a-week delivery—for years, as a step towards increasing the exploitation of the workforce. If there were any genuine concern for post workers’ workloads, the ever-increasing door-to-door deliveries of junk mail would already have been cancelled.

RMG are using the pandemic as a pretext to advance their long-planned cost-cutting agenda, as postal workers knew they would. Postal workers went into this crisis having given an overwhelming mandate for strike action against precisely these plans. But from the outset, the CWU’s policy has been to prevent that confrontation taking place, while seeking to utilise their members’ ballot as leverage to gain the union bureaucracy a well-paid seat at the company’s table. Their goal is to return to the cosy relations enjoyed with management before Back decided to dispense with their services—relations which saw concession after concession forced on postal workers.

At the start of the coronavirus crisis, the union called off a strike voted for by 94.5 percent of members on a 63.4 percent turnout. Without any consultation of its membership, Ward and Pullinger proposed a gentlemen’s agreement with Royal Mail and Boris Johnson’s Tory government. In a “proposal to the company based on putting the interests of the nation first,” the CWU offered up Royal Mail workers as an “additional emergency service.” The CWU claimed this would end attacks on jobs and conditions and see the necessary safety measures implemented by RMG.

The *World Socialist Web Site* wrote March 19 that the profit interests of Royal Mail management had not

“magically disappeared in response to the pandemic. If anything, the lockdown of large sections of the economy will leave the super-rich more determined to squeeze every last ounce of profit out of delivery workers.” We explained that “Strike action would be the basis for demanding safe working conditions and precautions against the spread of the virus, not just in Royal Mail but for the whole working class.”

The union’s proposal was duly ignored by management. In the following weeks, depot after depot staged wildcat action over safety concerns. At least four postal workers died after contracting COVID-19.

Desperate to avoid an escalation, the CWU made further appeals to the Tory government and arranged a meeting with RMG. Back declined to attend and his representatives told the union to get lost. To the outrage of increasing numbers of postal workers, there was still no call for a strike from the union.

The *World Socialist Web Site* commented on April 3, “Important political conclusions must now be drawn. The last few weeks of union activity—during which many workers undoubtedly became infected—were a pantomime. The CWU’s sole intention has been to maintain a well-paid seat at the negotiating table with Royal Mail and the government, under the guise of establishing an ‘emergency service.’”

Now even the pantomime lies in tatters. Besides leaving workers and their families at risk, the CWU’s opposition to any struggle has prepared the way for the grave assault on its members, threatening 20,000 jobs.

None of which is of the least concern to the union. Their toothless and insincere threat of industrial action—made after nearly two months of sitting on a live strike ballot—was motivated solely by their being bypassed in their role as industrial policemen. “By their actions,” the CWU wrote in its statement on Wednesday, “Royal Mail has derecognised the union.”

This has now been rectified. Ward told the online conference that Back “confirmed that next week there will be discussions to start talking about a framework for negotiations to resolve the overall dispute that we’ve got with Royal Mail.”

Pullinger made clear the sort of “negotiations” being planned, boasting, “The union over the years has brought forward many of the big solutions which have helped this company...”

“Whatever our beliefs in protecting our members

and protecting this great public service, the other thing this union brings to the table is its operational experience and understanding of how we can deal with problems... The lesson is, if [Royal Mail] had spoken to us about how we can deal with [the “emergency” the company has invoked to justify cancelling Saturday deliveries], we believe there could have been progress and we could have assisted in that.”

Postal workers have been given an object lesson that must not be ignored. No trust whatsoever can be placed in the CWU. It does not make a blind bit of difference whether Royal Mail keeps its word and enters negotiations with the unions. This is a discussion amongst thieves. Sooner or later, Saturday deliveries will be cancelled permanently, and 20,000 jobs will go. Worse will follow, courtesy of the CWU.

What matters now is how workers at Royal Mail go forward in fighting for their own interests. The strike they voted for should be organised now. Its demands must be a permanent end to all attacks on jobs and conditions, the return of pay and pensions lost in previous union sellouts, and the immediate implementation of the safest working environment for those in work and financial security for those required to self-isolate. This struggle must be organised by rank-and-file committees of trusted workers, independent of the union bureaucracy.

A postal worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “I have been following the articles written by the wsws.org on the postal workers’ struggle for some time. Everything you warned about has now come to pass. Postal worker must draw some immediate conclusions, and one of them must be to take this current action out of the hands of the union and form rank and file committees. This really is a life and death issue.”

The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* will lend every assistance to this fight. We encourage Royal Mail workers to contact us.

To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>