

Britain: Demands for government intervention aimed at strangling post dispute

By Julie Hyland
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Unofficial strike action broke out at several postal sorting offices across the UK early Wednesday morning in response to delibAs we go to press, talks are under way between Royal Mail and the Communication Workers Union (CWU), as unofficial action that began at postal sorting depots in London, Glasgow and Liverpool Wednesday spread to several other offices by Thursday morning.

The talks followed increasing demands for the Brown government to intervene in the postal dispute.

Such calls pose enormous dangers to postal workers. Though framed as a means of achieving a “fair” and “just” settlement, any government intervention will be entirely on the side of Royal Mail management and at the expense of workers conditions, pay and pension rights.

The wildcat action came just as the UK’s 130,000 postal workers were due to end a 48-hour strike against Royal Mail’s efforts to impose “total flexibility” on the workforce, with the loss of more than 40,000 jobs and substantial cuts in pensions.

The five-month dispute has seen a series of rolling strikes across the country. But repeated efforts by the CWU to achieve a deal have failed. Royal Mail has made clear it will not retreat on its objectives.

The European Union’s agreement to deregulate postal services across the continent has seen the government and Royal Mail intensify efforts to fully privatise the UK’s network.

Making the public monopoly competitive with, and thereby attractive to, the private sector, can only be achieved through a massive offensive against jobs and conditions. Royal Mail has insisted that it must be able to determine working duties and shift times—changing them on a week-to-week basis should it deem this necessary. It also wants to close the current pension scheme and transfer new and existing members over to “career average” scheme, with the potential loss of up to half of retirement income.

On Wednesday, staff reporting to start their 5:00 a.m. shifts at sites in London, Liverpool and Glasgow were informed that management had arbitrarily changed their working hours, and that they would have to start one hour later and would be expected to stay later at the end of the day.

In response, hundreds of workers at 24 sites walked

out. Hurried local negotiations between the CWU and Royal Mail produced no agreement. By Thursday morning, the wildcat action had spread to 30 delivery offices in London and Merseyside, with reports that workers in Liverpool had staged a sit-in.

The mood of defiance and militancy caused 40 Labour MPs to table a Commons motion calling on the government—as Royal Mail’s single shareholder—to intervene in the dispute. Ministers should take “a more active and interventionist role in trying to ensure a fair, just and negotiated settlement to the current dispute,” it said.

In a statement, the CWU supported calls for government intervention. The CWU “believes the time is right for the Government to intervene in a positive way to resolve the dispute,” it said, adding that the “CWU remains committed to achieving an agreement.”

Claims that the government could play a “moderating” influence in the dispute were again reiterated by Gregor Gall, a professor of industrial relations and a leading member of the Scottish Socialist Party. Gall told BBC Radio 4’s “Today” programme there was a “pressing need” for government intervention because both sides in the dispute were so entrenched.

“If the service is to be resumed to its normal state, then I think the government, as the single shareholder, does need to step in, and not just call for an end to the strike but actually work towards resolving the issues,” he said.

But Prime Minister Gordon Brown has already made explicit his government’s insistence that the postal dispute be resolved on Royal Mail’s terms. In a statement on Wednesday, he spelt out that postal workers’ concerns over the safety of their jobs and conditions—including pension rights that they have paid into, in some cases for years—are illegitimate. Not only have they no right to oppose the ripping up of working agreements, but they should accept management diktat without question.

There was “no justification” for the dispute, Brown stated, calling on postal workers to return to work immediately. The dispute “should be brought to an end on the terms that have been offered as soon as possible.”

Speaking on the BBC’s “World at One”, John Hutton, secretary of state for business and enterprise,

reiterated Brown's claim those at fault in the dispute were the postal workers themselves.

"There is a perfectly decent offer on the table," Hutton claimed. "It does not justify this type of industrial action."

The Brown government's stance is no surprise. Its sole aim is the imposition of the interests of big business in all aspects of social and economic life. Hutton himself has boasted that his department will be "aggressively pro-business" as part of the aim of marking out Labour as the "natural party of business."

Thus far, the government has steered clear of official involvement in the dispute. Having imposed a pay freeze on hundreds of thousands of public sector workers, Brown is reluctant to do anything that might make the union bureaucracy's efforts to control growing anger any more difficult.

While the government and Royal Mail have made clear their intransigence, the CWU has shown no such intent.

The union has been desperate to secure some form of a deal that it could sell to its members. In August, it called off a rolling programme of industrial action without any consultation with its membership, for six

weeks of secret negotiations. But thus far, it has proven impossible for the union to dress up the type of swingeing changes insisted upon by Royal Mail in any flattering guise.

Even as the company made clear it was prepared for a war of attrition, changing working practices without notice, the CWU insisted it remained "resolute in seeking an acceptable negotiated settlement."

The CWU statement continued disturbingly that "*Elements* of Royal Mail's proposal remain unacceptable and we hope to resolve these outstanding areas through negotiation" (emphasis added).

The further outbreak of wildcat action will only add to the CWU's determination to sell out the dispute. In Liverpool, a CWU representative revealed that, faced with the unofficial walkout by its members, the union had sought a deal with management that accepted its change in hours in order to get postal workers back to work.

Mark Walsh, the Merseyside branch secretary of the CWU, stated that the union had "offered a compromise by saying to management that we will accept their working hours if we are given two weeks to come up with alternative proposals."