

Britain: Postal workers vote for national pay strike

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Britain's postal workers have voted two to one for strike action over a five percent pay claim. In a 65 percent turn out, 63 percent voted in favour of industrial action. Consignia (formerly Royal Mail) had offered a two percent pay rise.

If the strike goes ahead it would be the first national strike since 1996, but it is already in some doubt as to whether the Communications Workers Union (CWU) will act on the ballot. The union said it will not call a strike for two weeks, and is seeking talks with Consignia to resolve the pay dispute. CWU General Secretary Billy Hayes said, "We will discuss arrangements to implement industrial action next week, but I sincerely hope that the result will encourage management to look again at their position so that we can reach an agreement rather than take action".

Postal workers historically have been among the lowest paid workers in Britain. The basic wage of a delivery postman is £250.53 per week, rising to £300 in London. The average wage for a manual worker is £277. A five percent increase would only bring postal workers up to the national average. Many workers with families are claiming benefits and working more than eight hours overtime to supplement their wages.

The vote for strike action also shows the level of anger and resentment over broader questions such as job security and the privatisation of the Post Office. But the CWU has kept the question of pay entirely separate from the projected 30,000 job losses expected as a result of Consignia's ongoing privatisation.

In December, when the job losses were first announced, the CWU said it would call industrial action. Instead the union held intensive talks with Consignia, after which it pledged to work with management to implement the redundancies and quell any opposition amongst its members.

The CWU had already agreed in June 2001 to clampdown on unofficial strikes. It went on to declare that, "Under the latest agreement, the CWU has agreed to suspend any ballots for industrial action and Royal Mail undertakes not to press ahead with any unagreed changes to working practices at local level... both Royal Mail and the CWU are determined to build further on the deal. It represents a further significant step towards achieving a lengthy period without strikes".

So closely do the CWU and Consignia work together that it is difficult to see where the union ends and the company starts. The fruits of this collaboration can be seen in the union's refusal to oppose the job losses stemming from the restructuring of the Post Office in preparation for privatisation. The CWU has said it is "committed to reaching a new agreement in relation to the handling of staff surpluses". It made a show of opposing compulsory redundancies during negotiations, but the final text of the deal is at best ambiguous even on this question. The agreement will be "*built upon reasonable alternative job offers* and voluntary redundancies" (emphasis added), which means that if what is deemed to be reasonable alternative employment is turned down, a worker can be said to have made himself redundant.

As soon as the CWU signed the agreement, chief executive of Consignia John Roberts said, "we can never rule out compulsory redundancies." The deal between Consignia and the CWU has thus cleared the way for privatisation, with the union bureaucracy acting as industrial policemen during the transition.



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