

London: Royal Mail provokes unofficial postal strike

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An unofficial strike, which began with a handful of London, England, postal workers taking action, has spread throughout the capital and to other parts of the country. Two major sorting offices are on strike in Essex, and parts of Oxfordshire, Berkshire, Kent, Yorkshire and Scotland are now affected. In total, 20,000 workers are on strike.

The action is the result of a culmination of many grievances. One such incident was when a rat was found in a toilet and postal workers were refused permission to use another toilet, which led to the suspension of a union official.

The main strike, however, began on October 17 with the suspension of 16 workers in West London's Southall delivery office after they refused to take special delivery items to destination addresses rather than depots. The drivers said the work was not part of their usual duties.

The strikes have largely been provoked by Royal Mail to ram through far-reaching changes in working practices in the run-up to the privatisation of the remaining postal network. Royal Mail refused to increase overtime to clear the backlog of mail after a series of official one-day strikes over the "London weighting"—the extra pay given to workers who live in the capital, due to its high cost of living—and have changed workers' conditions without agreement, insisting that Saturday be treated as a normal working day.

Union officials have accused Royal Mail of "attacking, humiliating and belittling union members." The post office is demanding that all local working arrangements end, and in place it seeks to introduce by executive action a new one-delivery service.

Management's heavy-handed tactics run the risk of the strikes escalating into an all-out national postal

strike. They have underestimated the anger that is felt by postal workers up and down the country over the escalating attacks on their working conditions. Royal Mail brought in 6,000 managers from offices outside the capital to try to sort mail. But when casuals were used in Harrow to sort blacked mail, staff walked out and joined the strike.

In one bizarre but provocative incident, the head of the Post Office, Alan Leighton, turned up unannounced at a mass meeting of postal workers. He said, "Hello I'm Alan Leighton. What's it all about?" After being told in no uncertain terms that postal workers were being treated like dirt, he made a somewhat undignified exit back to his chauffeur-driven car.

The strikes give vent to the years of pent-up frustration of postal workers over attacks on wages and conditions. Postal workers are some of the worst paid in the public sector, with many having to do a vast amount of overtime to supplement their wages.

Most workers' fears now center on the impact of privatisation, and the majority of strikes over the last two years have concerned this issue in one form or another. Many postal workers no longer see any long-term job security, their pay is being cut, and management is seen as bullying and overbearing. In some areas, staff turnover is running at 50 percent. On top of that, Royal Mail has announced that more than 30,000 jobs will be eliminated immediately.

The fact that this strike represents the first serious action since 2001 largely results from the role played by the Communications Workers Union (CWU) in suppressing opposition to privatisation. Strikes in the post office, official or unofficial, are running at a 10-year low. This stems from the no-strike agreement brokered between the CWU and Royal Mail in 2001. While the union strangled any wildcat action, Royal

Mail launched attack after attack on working conditions. Since last year alone, the union has overseen the destruction of 10,000 out of the 30,000 job losses proposed.

In June 2001, the CWU and Royal Mail commissioned an independent review of industrial relations, in response to a spate of unofficial strike actions. Under the agreement, the CWU agreed to suspend any ballots for industrial action and Royal Mail undertook a vague promise “not to press ahead with any changes to working practices at local level that have not been agreed.”

The agreement specified, “Both Royal Mail and the CWU are determined to build on the deal. It represents a further significant step towards achieving a lengthy period without strikes.”

In March 2003, a second review was carried out by Lord Sawyer, chairman of the first review, who reported that “in the 15 months prior to publication of the 1st report (April 2000-June 2001) Royal mail lost 111,792 days in industrial action. In the 15 months since the moratorium was agreed 9,587 days have been lost. This represents a fall of over 91 percent and its lowest level of industrial action within the Royal Mail for ten years. Royal Mail’s performance has improved as a direct result.”

The report then goes on to highlight the increase in productivity since 2002:

“At the end of December 2002, 91.7 percent of all first class letters had been delivered on target in the current financial year. This is compared to 89.4 percent in the previous year, a clear and sustained improvement.”

The report also urged the CWU to “[b]e prepared to regard itself as a partner in Royal Mail, with a focus on the success of the business in a changing commercial environment and on the needs of the customer.”

The deal between the Post Office and the CWU has cleared the way for the privatisation of the business, with the union acting as policemen in suppressing any opposition by its members. Recently Postcomm, the Postal Services Commission set up by the Labour government to regulate the postal market, has increased pressure on Royal Mail to open up its national monopoly by demanding that 30 percent of the market—worth £1.5 billion—is opened to competition.

This is the extremely profitable end of the market. It

consists of large business users mailing out 4,000 items or more. Banks, government departments and mail order firms send out 2.5 billion to 5 billion items of mail a year. Postcomm will, in a second phase, release a further 30 percent of the market from April 2004, when rival postal operators will be allowed to handle bulk mailing of 500-1,000 items.

By 2006, restrictions on market entry will be done away with entirely, enabling people to send and receive letters using firms other than Royal Mail for the first time in more than 300 years. Postcomm’s chairman John Corbett said, “Complete liberalisation could be brought forward by one or even two years depending on how successful the first stages proved. Licenses will be for seven years and then indefinite.”

References:

Independent Report on industrial relations second review, March 2003

Independent Report on industrial relations, May 2002



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