

Britain: Union sells out postal strike

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Nearly 30,000 postal workers returned to work on November 3 after a two-week unofficial strike was ended following a deal struck between the Communication Workers Union (CWU) and Royal Mail. In an expression of gratitude to the CWU for its work in ending the strike, Royal Mail has said that it recognises that the CWU did not instigate the unofficial action and that they will not make any legal claims on the union.

The main points of the deal are that Royal Mail will not conduct disciplinary action against its staff for taking unofficial action; managers and employees will cooperate to ensure that service to the customer is returned to normal as soon as possible and that all mail will be handled regardless of where it is posted or by whom it has been processed or distributed.

Most importantly, the agreement states that Royal Mail and the CWU will “commit to fully abide by the terms of all existing national agreements including the IR [Industrial Relations] Framework, Way Forward and Scheduled attendance agreements.

“Any local agreements or arrangements that either party can identify that conflict with national agreements will be jointly reviewed locally to ensure they comply by the end of 2003. Through our respective national teams, Billy Hayes, Dave Ward, Allan Leighton and Adam Crozier are all committed to achieving a national agreement on single delivery by December 10 2003 at ACAS.”

By identifying the problem as one of local agreements breaching national agreements, the CWU have in effect signed on once more to Royal Mail’s plans to privatise substantial parts of the postal service and step up its attacks on jobs and working conditions, as exemplified in the instigation of a single delivery system.

From day one of the strike, Royal Mail has sought to push through the privatisation of the remaining sections

of the Post Office as quickly as possible. This means the tearing up of old agreements and the implementation of new methods of working, such as the ending of a twice-daily delivery service—to be replaced with a single service—and treating Saturday as a normal working day.

The head of Royal Mail, Alan Leighton, who is a Labour Party member and has been fully supported by the Blair government, is attempting to complete a process that was began in the early 1980s. Privatisation is driven by two related developments. Firstly, the exponential growth of electronic mail has placed massive demands on postal services the world over to cut costs and improve efficiency in order to remain competitive. It is now five years since the number of international messages sent by fax took a bigger share of the market than those conveyed by post. In 2000, for the first time the volume of e-mail in the United States exceeded the number of letters delivered by the US Postal Service. Computers now generate more than 80 percent of all mail sent.

Secondly, the globalisation of trade and industry facilitated by these same technological developments has torn the ground from under the postal service as a nationally based venture. Whereas the Post Office once enjoyed monopoly status as a domestic carrier, today it is forced to compete at home and abroad against its international rivals.

In Britain, restructuring is being stepped up due to the pressure being exerted from the European Union (EU) to reduce the monopoly held by national postal carriers and open up markets to competition. The first stage of this liberalisation will be completed by the end of this year, and the next stage in 2007. This has already led to massive job losses in Europe.

The wildcat strike expressed hostility to the impact of the privatisation of the post, but took the character of a defensive struggle to preserve existing working

conditions. And it has highlighted the schism that has opened up between the workforce and not only the Royal Mail bosses but their allies in the CWU union bureaucracy.

The CWU has verbally opposed privatisation, but in practice has worked with Royal Mail to implement it. The union has not organised a single campaign or called a strike against privatisation. Numerous articles in the media have tried to say that the strike was spearheaded by the national union though its local activists or—according to the radical press—that this was a strike to defend the union. Royal Mail accused the CWU and especially its leader Billy Hayes—who is part of the so called “awkward squad” of recently elected left union leaders—of running the strike.

The purpose of this attack was to place maximum pressure on the union leaders to call their members to order. But the CWU hardly needed any encouragement to do this. From day one, the CWU repudiated the unofficial action and distanced itself from the strike. It then worked with Royal Mail to end it. Its main complaint against Royal Mail was that of an aggrieved partner. It accused management of seeking to impose the changes in working practices through what the CWU called “executive action” (i.e., without union help).

For two years, the union has cooperated in a no-strike deal with Royal Mail in return for being “consulted” on changes in working practices. The “awkward squadder” Mr. Hayes has in fact presided over record increases of productivity and overseen a 91 percent reduction in strike action. As part of the latest deal, the CWU has now agreed to working for the end of a second delivery and the start of a once-over-the-ground delivery by December of this year.



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