

British SWP covers for sell-out of postal workers strike

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21 August 2007

On August 9, the Communication Workers Union (CWU) announced that it was suspending further strike action in Britain's postal service. Without any explanation to its members, the CWU declared it was entering negotiations with Royal Mail in an attempt to reach an agreement by September 4. A national demonstration planned for August 21 was cancelled.

All that a joint union-management statement had to say was, "At a meeting today between [Royal Mail chairman] Allan Leighton, [chief executive] Adam Crozier, [CWU General Secretary] Billy Hayes and [CWU Deputy General Secretary] Dave Ward, it was agreed that both parties commit to talks on all the issues between them, hosted and facilitated by the Trades Union Congress... During this period the talks are on a confidential basis with no media or internal briefings unless explicitly agreed."

From what little has been leaked out in the media it is clear that the Royal Mail has not retreated from its previous positions. It still intends to bring in changes in working practices such as later starts in the morning, later finishes on Saturday and the stopping of Sunday collections from September 17. In its only concession, the company will continue to pay a £12.50 shift allowance, but only to existing workers and not new starters, thus creating a two-tier work force.

Whilst Royal Mail says it has no money for decent pay rises, it does have money to hand out massive bonuses to its executives. According to leaks to the *Sunday Times*, Crozier received a bonus of £370,000 two months ago and Post Office managing director Alan Cook is in line to receive up to £1million if he pushes through the post office closure programme.

The reason for the sudden start of negotiations was the eruption of a wave of wildcat strikes by postal workers that threatened to turn into a national unofficial strike and rebellion against the CWU's years of collaboration with privatisation of the postal service.

From the early 1980s, when the Thatcher Conservative government first split and privatised parts of the Post Office, through to the liberalisation undertaken by the Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, the CWU has overseen the loss of tens of thousands of jobs and sabotaged action mounted by postal workers to defend them.

This June, the vast majority of workers participated in the first national strike for 10 years against attempts to slash 40,000 more jobs, cap wage rises at 2.5 percent and break up the universal postal service. They were joined by thousands of counter workers at the big high street post offices, who are now continuing to strike in isolation against plans to transfer services at 70 offices to newsagents WH Smith. The Post Office also wants to freeze or cut their pay and close offices, which will lead to the loss of 1,500 jobs.

As in previous disputes, the CWU has used strikes to allow workers to let off steam, whilst seeking to prevent a political confrontation with the Labour government and its pro-business agenda. It started to wind down the dispute almost as soon as it started. The national strikes were called

off and a rolling strike system imposed that led to some groups or shifts of workers going on strike whilst others carried on working.

But unofficial action began to escalate across Britain in response to Royal Mail's victimisation of workers who refused to cross their colleagues' picket lines.

On July 17, 500 workers in Oxford went on unofficial strike for a week, followed by workers in Liverpool, Preston and other areas. On July 30, van drivers who refused to cross picket lines at St Rollox Post Office in Glasgow were suspended, leading to unofficial action throughout Scotland the following day. The CWU disowned the action and demanded "union discipline". Graham Steedman, CWU representative for Edinburgh, summed up the bureaucracy's attitude, saying, "I've asked members to go back in because this strike is unofficial, and they have basically told me where to go. The members will not go back until the four workers are back on pay and not forced to deal with the scab mail. We've told management to put it to one side until a resolution is found in Wishaw and Glasgow, but they refused."

The role of the SWP

The CWU leadership is deeply discredited over its support for competition and privatisation. In order to prevent a rebellion against its leadership and a struggle against the Labour government, the CWU relies on the Socialist Workers Party—Britain's largest left-radical group and the major party within the Respect-Unity coalition. The former Labour Member of Parliament (MP) George Galloway was elected as a Respect MP for the east London constituency of Bethnal Green and Bow in 2005 on an anti-war platform.

In 2002, SWP member Jane Loftus became the first non-Labour Party member to be elected to the CWU national executive and, in June 2007, became the CWU President. Loftus's election was an indication that postal workers wanted to defend their jobs, improve their working conditions, and resist the CWU's cooperation with the government's privatisation programme. It was a sign that workers were looking for an alternative to the bankrupt Labour Party.

However, Loftus and the SWP set about channeling opposition to New Labour into a rank-and-file campaign to pressurise a section of the bureaucracy to the left and so revive "traditional" reformist Labour policies—in the process, allowing parties like Respect a share of the political funding that unions donate to the Labour party.

With the suspension of strike action, it was left to the *Socialist Worker* to cover up the betrayal and defend the bureaucracy. The August 18 issue praised the strike for forcing "an arrogant Royal Mail management to the negotiating table" before mildly criticising the union for suspending the strikes before Royal Mail had "given them a real offer" or reinstated

suspended workers.

The SWP has not exposed the role played by Hayes or Ward, nor could it—their perspective is entirely in line with the one pursued by Loftus and the SWP. All of them have attempted to portray Royal Mail boss Leighton as a maverick intent on pursuing his own privatisation strategy, independent of the Labour government.

Despite Labour ministers licensing private firms to compete against Royal Mail and approving attempts to abolish the final salary pension scheme for new entrants and introduce a “phantom share” scheme, the SWP urged workers to direct appeals to Prime Minister Gordon Brown to intervene. Loftus declared, “The government cannot avoid its direct responsibility for this dispute. Ministers could end it today. They should tell Allan Leighton to stop attacking the workforce and postal services.”

If Brown did not act, Loftus said, workers had to put pressure on Labour MPs and, if that didn’t work, “to go deeper and get into the constituencies” to get them to exert pressure. Putting pressure on the government to maintain a nationalised postal service also lay behind Loftus’s July 31 Appeal to Trade Unionists—directed at the leadership of the civil service union CPS and demanding “joint action” on a list of vague demands.

The claim that Leighton is a maverick rather than the instrument of government policy has become impossible to maintain—and so is the fiction that there remains within the Labour Party a militant base of members who can exert some sort of control over MPs. Over decades it has been reduced to a shell, with its right-wing policies succeeding in driving out anyone with any loyalty to workers’ interests, and attracting a layer of aspiring middle-class careerists of the Blair type. More than half the party’s membership has left since 1997.

The same essential process can be found within the trade unions, despite their larger but still-declining membership base. Workers do not attend branch meetings, leaving the bureaucracy to pursue its own opportunist course—including those (such as Loftus) who strike a “left” pose in order to win election.

The SWP has also sowed illusions that the loosely-aligned group of left union demagogues (whom Tony Blair dubbed the “awkward squad”)—notably Hayes and the CPS leader Mark Serwotka—would somehow renew the unions and raise “the prospect of a serious struggle against the bosses and New Labour.” Instead, they have proved to be far from awkward, maintaining political relations with Blair and Brown and continuing to fund the Labour Party.

The rotten political relationship between the SWP and these bureaucrats was brought to light in a significant exchange between Hayes and SWP industrial writer Charlie Kimber at the end of 2002. It took place after the CWU agreed to the transfer of Romec cleaning and maintenance workers to private contractor Balfour Beatty—a move that gave the green light to the Post Office to attempt to outsource cash handling depots (CHDs) to Securicor.

Faced with an unofficial strike and unprecedented hostility to the union, Kimber was forced to rebuke Hayes for supporting trade union-management “partnership” and agreeing to privatisation if “the price is right.” Kimber let it be known that when Hayes told senior union officials after the Romec deal, “I know that some of you think I’ve sold out,” he was told, “Heads nodded round the room.”

SWP member and Exeter CWU rep Fran Choules added that the CHD dispute was “a defining moment in the union’s fight against privatisation.” Moreover, the CWU’s strategy of “concentrating demands purely on the terms and conditions of the Romec members was at best naive, and at worst duplicitous.”

This was too much for Hayes. He demanded Kimber and Choules explain what the SWP advocated instead. If it was unofficial industrial action, Hayes declared, “members of the Socialist Workers Party have not advanced such a policy at branch or national executive level.” He said it

was the first time he had heard anyone call the union’s tactics “naive or at worst duplicitous”.

Hayes laid his cards on the table, making it clear he was not prepared to countenance a strike against privatisation because it would be illegal and the union had already been fined £1 million in 1995 because it had not repudiated unofficial action. “Unlike South Africa, you cannot have strike action on privatisation; it is a political issue in the UK,” Hayes insisted.

In response to such an open declaration, any principled socialist organisation would have exposed Hayes’ position and warned workers of the necessity for a political struggle against the trade union and Labour bureaucracy and the need for a new socialist leadership. Instead, the SWP capitulated to Hayes who, from the standpoint of his own right-wing policies, simply exposed the SWP’s own duplicity.

Kimber replied meekly that “sometimes action that goes against the anti-union laws is the only way for workers to defend themselves,” but the issue has been dropped and Hayes has continued to appear on SWP platforms unchallenged and is not criticised in its press.

Recently Hayes cemented his rightward evolution by joining the Compass group—an organisation that played a central role in fashioning New Labour and ensured an orderly transition from Blair to Brown. He addressed a Compass meeting in the House of Commons at the height of the postal strikes and publicly embraced the market economy with the words, “We are not spectators of the market, we are participants, and we want the market to serve the consumer not vice versa”.

How the CWU can defend postal workers when it supports the market, the very social force that is responsible for the destruction of the workers’ living standards in the first place, is not raised by Loftus or the SWP.

The need for a new socialist party

The SWP’s abiding by union discipline, its refusal to expose Hayes, and its demands that workers spend all their political energies struggling to alter government policies, all confirm that it has become integrated into the upper echelons of the trade union bureaucracy and is hostile to the basic interests of the working class.

If postal workers are to advance their struggle against the privatisation of the post office and mass job losses, then the unofficial strikes must be transformed into a political rebellion against the CWU leadership and its left apologists such as the SWP.

The degeneration of the old workers’ organisations is the product of their nationalist and reformist programme and organisation. When production was predominantly organised within national borders, it was possible to extract certain concessions from the employers through strikes and protests, without challenging the essential framework of the profit system. Today, the union bureaucracy has abandoned such a struggle in direct response to the ability of the major corporations to organise globally. Instead, as with the Royal Mail, they accept and impose the mantra of the employers that attacks on jobs and working conditions are necessary in order to meet the challenge of international competition. And they in turn are well paid for doing so.

At no time does the bureaucracy start from the position that the interests of postal workers in every country are opposed to those of the corporate elite and must be fought for in common. Yet without such a unified struggle, workers are plunged again and again into a fratricidal conflict over who will accept the greater sacrifice. Only the adoption of an international strategy by the working class—reaching out to postal workers and those in other industries—can put an end to this ever-downward spiral.

Postal workers must also recognise that they are involved in a direct political struggle against the Labour government, for which trade union

action alone is not enough. Labour has presided over a decimation of workers' living standards that has outstripped that previously imposed by the Conservatives. So far it has relied on its counterparts in the CWU bureaucracy to carry through the changes dictated by big business. But, should the need arise, Brown will not hesitate to mobilise the police and the full weight of the law to ensure that the interests of the state prevail and so pave the way for privatisation. The working class must now undertake the construction of its own socialist and internationalist party, in order to pursue the fight against the parties of capital.



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