

Britain: Postal union agrees to sell-out deal with Royal Mail

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By means of legal threats and with the connivance of the trade union bureaucracy, Royal Mail hopes to end the postal dispute and achieve its aim of overturning working conditions and pension rights, and eliminate tens of thousands of jobs.

This is the meaning of Friday's announcement that talks between Adam Crozier, Royal Mail's chief executive, Brendan Barber, General Secretary of the Trade Union Congress and Billy Hayes and Dave Ward, leaders of the Communication Workers Union (CWU) had ended in agreement.

That this agreement will be at the expense of postal workers was made clear by the fact that, more than 48 hours after the announcement, no details on it have been released. A terse two-line statement issued by Royal Mail and the CWU said that the "agreed terms covering all the issues in the dispute will be considered by the union's Executive on Monday", after which both parties would issue statements.

Reports indicate that the CWU has given Royal Mail everything it wanted. The BBC's business editor Robert Preston said it was understood that the "big pillars' of management demands were in place", including substantial inroads against pension rights and the implementation of working practices that the CWU only days before had condemned as akin to "slavery".

The utter rottenness of the union is expressed in the fact that—whatever the finer details of the agreement—after a five-month dispute that has included six days of strike action and a significant loss of pay, postal staff are being told to return to work under conditions worse than when they first went out.

The CWU knows that its agreement will meet with hostility from many of its members. That is why it intends to use the next week to systematically demobilise postal workers and create a fait accompli.

Indeed, there is every reason to believe that the CWU was just as relieved as Royal Mail when a High Court judge ruled on Friday that official strikes planned at mail centres and delivery offices were illegal and must be stopped.

In a highly political judgement, the court granted Royal Mail an injunction against the strikes, due today and tomorrow, on the grounds that the CWU had failed to stipulate the precise figures for the number of staff that would be affected.

Significantly, while the CWU rejected the ruling, it did not seek immediate leave to appeal and has subsequently indicated that it will suspend strikes planned for Wednesday through Friday.

Just as important as stopping the official action, the ban also applies to the wildcat strikes that had broken out in several areas of the country over the last days. Such, however, is the oppositional mood that unofficial action involving thousands of postal workers in Liverpool, London and Scotland went ahead on Saturday.

The walk-outs in these areas had been provoked by management's efforts to arbitrarily change working practices, including starting and finishing times. In some instances, postal workers reported that they had been told that just by starting work they would be accepting new terms of employment.

In an effort to break the strikes, Royal Mail had also begun organising a scabbing operation. The *Liverpool Echo* said Royal Mail had "been paying hundreds of students"—employed through an employment agency—"to clear mounting letters and parcels". Similarly, in London it was alleged that temporary staff were also being recruited to man an emergency sorting centre in north London.

The latest deal means that management has handed

the CWU the task of breaking workers' defiance, where it has failed. The union organised meetings on Sunday in an effort to end the wildcat walkouts. If reports are correct, the CWU and Royal Mail have left room for local agreements to be reached on flexible working; a move that will embolden management in its efforts to pick-off sites one by one.

The objective of all these manoeuvres is to clear the path for Royal Mail's privatisation. The *Financial Times* made clear the imperatives driving this in its comment October 4, where it explained, "Just this week, the European Union finally agreed proposals to liberalise postal services across Europe from 2011.

"To compete in this environment, Royal Mail needs fundamental change that will not happen as long as it stays in the public sector. Political realities mean that will not happen overnight. In the meantime, commercial realities mean modernisation cannot be put off."

That is, in order to compete with the likes of Germany's Deutsche Post, the most profitable sections of Britain's postal network are to be hived off to the private sector, creating a financial bonanza for the City of London and the corporate elite.

A privatised national mail distribution network will inevitably suffer the same fate as has befallen Britain's railways and the London Underground. Any notion of a "public service" is to be jettisoned with unprofitable home deliveries cut back and post offices sold or closed (nearly 5,000 have been sold off so far). And this so-called "modernisation" is to be attained by returning to labour conditions in which workers are entirely at the beck and call of management.

Many postal workers will have already determined that the deal cooked up between Royal Mail and the CWU cannot be allowed to stand if they are to retain any of their rights. Nor can the union be allowed to drag out the so-called consultation procedure over the agreement, enabling Royal Mail to create facts on the ground.

Postal workers must take the dispute out of the hands of the trade union bureaucracy, by establishing rank-and-file committees to extend the wildcat action across the country and link up with others workers in struggle across Europe and internationally.

This necessary struggle must be guided by the recognition that workers across the world share the

same concerns and interests—none of which can be solved within the confines of the national state and an economic system that subordinates social need to corporate profit and private wealth.

As the preferred party of big business, Labour has a vested interest in ensuring Royal Mail is victorious. Not only are the company's aims essentially those of the government but Labour is enforcing a public sector pay freeze that, in the case of the prison officers, it is preparing to back up with a no-strike ban. Concerned that the mood of defiance and militancy amongst postal workers may spread to other sections of workers, the government is determined it be stamped out as quickly as possible.

The perspective of the trade union bureaucracy is no different. One of the most vociferous attacks on the postal workers has come from former union leader and Labour Baroness Margaret Prosser who insisted, "I don't think the management can give in. If we do, we are saying we are not going to compete with our competitors."

Previously the deputy general secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union, Prosser's move to her current post as a non-executive director of Royal Mail required no political conversion. Nor is it an individual aberration. Socially and ideologically committed to the maintenance of the profit system, the trade union bureaucracy works to ensure the competitiveness of their "own" corporations and bosses, regardless of the consequences for their members, much less the broad mass of workers and youth.

Jobs, working conditions and democratic rights can be defended only by rejecting the pro-capitalist perspective of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy, and setting out consciously to reorganise society along socialist lines through the building of a new workers party.



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