

Britain: Post workers speak out against union management agreement at Royal Mail

Our reporters
27 October 2007

The *World Socialist Web Site* has been speaking to postal workers about their reaction to the Communication Workers Union calling off industrial action against the Royal Mail and the deal agreed with management. A ballot of members has been set for just under two weeks' time, a period in which the CWU will attempt to dissipate and stifle opposition to its sell-out amongst the rank-and-file.

The management/union deal essentially agrees to all Royal Mail's original demands. A 6.9 percent wage increase over 18 months includes a previous 1.5 percent rise, which is dependent on full flexibility—as is an additional one-off lump sum. The CWU has agreed to local “flexibility” trials and, from January, all offices are to match working hours to mail volumes.

The CWU has also agreed that the issue of pensions be separated out from the current deal and dealt with via a working party. But this only delays the inevitable. In fact, Royal Mail is insisting that changes have already been agreed upon. The final salary pension scheme is to be closed for new entrants and the pension age raised from 60 to 65. Existing members will be able to still retire at 60, but will have to accept “actuarial reductions” in their pensions in return.

The Socialist Equality Party has called for a rejection of the deal and the building of rank-and-file committees to prepare a political and industrial struggle against Royal Mail, the Labour government and the union tops.

Neil from South Yorkshire told the WSWs, “Everything Royal Mail wanted was totally unacceptable. For example, changing start times seems like such a little thing. But the idea of it was they wanted to change start times plus or minus up to two hours. They only have to give you 24 hours notice. That's not good for your body-clock. You can't plan anything. People have kids to get to school and so on.

“They've already brought these changes in—this is what the wildcat strikes were over.

“Night shifts were there traditionally for the older workers. What they want to do now is say; ‘If you can't walk round with a big pack on your back, you've got to go’.

“They know there is an awful lot of militancy among the members and they're worried. They're talking about 40,000 job losses. I think that's a conservative estimate. In 10 years time, I reckon up to half of us could be gone. That's less than 100,000 postal workers left. It's cutback after cutback. Every six months management come to us for more cuts. I asked one manager, ‘When is enough?’ and he said, ‘Never, this will happen year on year.’ At our sorting office they want to cut back five percent every year. And that does not include the present agreement.

“I thought the pensions issue was diabolical. The change now from 60 to 65 years may go up to 70 years by the time I retire. When

you're 60, you can't walk 10 miles with a 16 kilo bag on your back (in actual fact I walked out today with a 21 kilo bag).

“For 13 years in the 1980s and 1990s, Royal Mail put no money into the pension scheme. And now they're saying there is no money in the pension fund. RM said that was what they had been advised to do by their accountants due to the stock market boom. One year in the late 1990s RM made £2 billion profit. Members paid in but RM paid in nothing. So now it's the members ‘fault’, they're ‘living too long’. Now times have gone bad, it's the workers who are to suffer. And it's not on.”

Beth said, “We came back after the strike and it was as if they wanted to punish us. There was the backlog of mail. It's usual to have to work over your time. Last week I went over by one hour.

“I do a 29 hour ‘walk’ over the week. Today I went in for 7.15—but found out that the start time had been changed to 7.45. At the beginning I loved my job. I can't believe how much has changed in the last six months, how much harder it's become.

“Management say they can't understand why we are going over time on our walks because the volume of mail is down—lost to other companies such as DHL, TNT and UK Mail, which don't have their own sorting offices or other overheads. These companies did a deal with Royal Mail for postal workers to deliver their mail, but they weren't charged enough.

“So we are delivering RM mail and that of the other companies. Mail bags have never been as heavy. A fellow worker weighed his bag recently and it was double the agreed [16 kilo] amount.

“I'd hoped this strike was for the better. It's a bit strange—one day for the union to be saying it's ‘slave conditions’ then the next, to be saying they'd done a deal. It is like a sell out. I think Royal Mail's strategy is to privatise the post. First they attempt to get workers angry and then they try to run them into the ground.”

Jamie said, “I truly believed what Royal Mail is trying to implement won't work as a service. It is still a nationalised service after all. It's no good chasing a big profit. We're now starting to see the knock-on effects of start-time changes. Basically we get the mail an hour later than before. This is a real pressure—to get the walk done in the specified time.

“What I've seen of the ‘new deal’ is that it's largely (give or take some slight changes and put backs for consultation in 2008) the same as before. The pension is ultimately not going to be worth very much. The changes are going to put a lot of people on the breadline in their old age.

“As long as I've been in the post, there have been instances of pressure exerted on workers to work over their time. But it's more prominent now—especially on newer less experienced members.

Management is also trying to create a 'bully culture'. In a general sense, I see it getting worse and worse as a job. If they get what they want, they'll basically keep taking money out of our pockets. According to the way it's going, I could be on less money in five years time than I am on now.

"I think postal workers need to look at the bigger picture, the implications of what's happening. They sold the railways off, only for fat cats to get rich, and look at what's happened in terms of the service and the safety on the railways."

Dave from London said, "I spent all my day off going through this new offer endorsed by our union executive. To be honest when they started it off with 6.9 percent over 18 months, I suspected something was amiss. Looking in more depth it is actually 5.4 percent over two years because the 1.5 percent is tied in with accepting and implementing flexibility that was in the original offer they rejected and called industrial action over.

"It now seems that this is accepted, that we have to 'move forward' although nothing has been removed from the table.

"It's like a car dealer unable to sell a motor that's been hanging around a bit because everyone can see it's a no-goer. So then he puts some alloys on, hangs some fluffy dice in and throws in a tank full of fuel. And [Communications Workers Union Deputy General Secretary] Dave Ward and [General Secretary] Billy Hayes have gone and bought it.

"What we have to remember is that the leaders of the CWU have close links with the Labour Party, our current government that incidentally are directly responsible for employing [Royal mail chief executive] Adam Crozier and [chairman Allan] Leighton and for the privatisation of our postal market.

"Flash Gordon [Brown] has in no uncertain terms told all public sector management to keep workers trim and make sure they're not causing his new premiership any problems by asking for inflation busting pay rises—ooh god forbid! So, going back to this old banger, maybe Dave and Billy thought, 'Hang-on, we know someone who'll buy this if we recommend it to them'—at a price, obviously. And there we have it—a new peerage or maybe a seat in Parliament for you Davey boy. Come to think of it didn't that happen to a former general secretary, now our health secretary?

"If I could turn back time, I'd undo the deregulation of our postal markets and revert it back to an entirely state run service!

"But it's not as simple as it once was. Nationally you vote in a political party, but due to the globalisation of our world its the major controllers of the free market economy that are the real presidents and prime ministers—they will dictate what happens and when."

Sue from London said, "The truth of the matter is that 'modernisation' has never been clearly defined to the workforce. In consequence the workforce has, understandably, been reluctant to agree to change for change's sake.

"Royal Mail wants to change working practices, which in reality are not bad, to some sort of management utopia where the workforce is at their beck and call. However, when it comes down to culling managerial dead weight there is a reluctance to wield the axe."

Mick said, "The pay and modernisation agreement is a disastrous day for posties everywhere. I thought I'd seen the worst with 'The Way Forward', but it pales at the side of this. A lot of the members in my office have said they will resign from the CWU if this deal goes through; a sad, sad day. "I believe the Labour government has shown itself in its true colours during this dispute, particularly Gordon Brown's asinine comments about there being no justification for the

dispute and we should accept the offer.

"I think the pay deal is not much different than it was before the 48 hour strikes and I think the union has let postmen and women down after losing so much money. I for one am thinking about jacking in the union as I have no confidence in them whatsoever. It is not the first time they have let us down."

Nicki said, "The new deal is just a rewritten version of the last deal, only it does not include all the issues. I believe if a yes vote is obtained these other issues temporarily brushed under the carpet will be enforced without further negotiations.

"The morale is gone from the office, and it was wearing thin to begin with. People are coming in at 5 AM even though starts are now 6 AM, just to get out the office before 10 AM. I am applying for other jobs as I see no future. Every new member of staff is brought in part-time. We are under-staffed, and walks are being left in the offices on a Saturday as there is no one to cover.

"Management that claim we are under-worked and overpaid would benefit from taking out my delivery for a week, a delivery that takes me four to five hours. Let them make comment on it then.

"All we have received about the new deal is two sheets of paper, lacking in any detail, and we are told the CWU deal is different to the one going around the office."

Norbert said, "The strike was the longest Mexican stand-off in history. Ward and Hayes [of the CWU] were frightened of it turning into a Margaret Thatcher/Ian McGregor versus National Union of Mineworkers/Arthur Scargill battle, but that's exactly what RM's Senior Managers wanted.

"The days when union leaders represented their members ended in the 1970s. It's all politics, and Ward and Hayes are vainly clinging onto the hope of crumbs from New Labour's table. That's like a drowning man... The CWU is too old fashioned, over centralized, too many weak reps that sit on things. They try to appear to be modern/reformist and from the top down appear to be feathering their own nests."

Ray said, "I feel we have been stitched up big time with this deal. Especially on the pensions! If I was to work for Royal mail until 65 I will have worked for 47 years for the firm!

"These later starts are not working. Customers are moaning even more, most don't know what time I get there, and even when I do I am an hour late.

"The CWU is not fighting for us, that's for sure. We were sold down the river!"



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact