

Britain's Socialist Workers Party collaborates in union's betrayal of postal strikes

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On October 17, the web site of Britain's Socialist Workers Party published the first detailed depiction of what was then only a proposed management offer to settle the ongoing post dispute. It was published as the response "from *Socialist Worker* supporters in the Royal Mail" and was only available online, as it came out after the party's newspaper had gone to press.

What is remarkable is that this was a deal that had been accepted last week by the Communication Workers Union negotiating team and discussed by its executive on October 15 and 16. This was a week in which the union had abided by a court injunction to call off rolling official strikes on those days and on October 18 and 19, and succeeded in getting postal workers in Liverpool, London and Yorkshire taking wildcat action to return to work.

In all this time, the proposed deal was never made available to Britain's 130,000 members. The SWP's account confirms that the deal was so rotten that the executive was clearly worried that it could not be sold to their members, hence the protracted discussions. The SWP know this because it has leading members within the union, including CWU President Jane Loftus. Yet it remained quiet until now, abiding by the rule of silence imposed by the union leadership. In doing so, it played a direct part in enabling the union leadership to demobilise mass opposition that was getting out of the control of the CWU to a deal they now urge be rejected.

It confirms Britain's largest left group, the main party within the Respect-Unity coalition led by former Labour MP George Galloway, as loyal defenders and political apologist for a union bureaucracy into which their membership has long been assimilated.

The SWP's politically criminal actions are underlined by its own depiction of what has been under discussion. The deal would, "sweep away crucial rights, steal our pensions, clear the way for more bullying, and give managers even more power to order us about," the statement reads. "It is a threat to us all and to the public service. Crucially it is silent on key issues like what happens over disciplinaries and mail centre closures."

On pensions, retirement age rises to 65. "Present scheme members could still retire at 60, but would have to accept 'actuarial reductions' in their pensions amounting to thousands of pounds. The present scheme would be closed to new members from next year, leading to a two-tier workforce."

Royal Mail wants "trials of flexible working in every area" involving a variation of hours by 30 minutes a day, readiness to go to "nearby offices" and do "other work outside their normal duties." Delivery start time will be between 6:00 a.m. and 6:30 a.m. The pay

offer the media claimed was 6.9 percent is in fact 5.4 percent over two years.

In a vague depiction of the discussion on the CWU leadership, the SWP writes that "the majority of the postal executive voted to call for amendments to the deal. Some voted to reject the deal even if the amendments were passed—and they were right to do so."

Deputy General Secretary Dave Ward was reportedly sent back to Royal Mail to ask for the minor changes proposed by the CWU executive majority. The SWP ends with a pathetic plea for the executive to then reject the deal—i.e., the one it was seeking. It did no such thing and instead has now endorsed the apparently barely changed agreement.

Over the last five months, CWU officials have done everything possible to impose discipline and break up the solidarity of postal workers. The "rolling strikes" forced workers to cross each other's picket lines, while the union took part in talks with Royal Mail and left postal workers in the dark. Last week, the CWU disowned the wildcat strikes provoked by management's pre-emptive attempts to bring in changes and organised a return to work.

The SWP has made virtually no criticisms of the union bureaucracy's activities, merely calling for more pressure on the Labour government to sack its own appointees, Royal Mail Chief Executive Adam Crozier and Chairman Allan Leighton whose proposals Gordon Brown described as "perfectly fair and reasonable."

When the CWU called off the first set of strikes on August 9, the August 18 issue of *Socialist Worker* nevertheless praised CWU leaders for forcing "an arrogant Royal Mail management to the negotiating table" before mildly rebuking them for suspending the strikes before Royal Mail had "given them a real offer." The CWU, as the SWP well knows, called off the strikes because the unofficial action threatened to spread out of its control and lead to a confrontation with the Labour government.

The September 18 issue of *Socialist Worker* also revealed that after negotiations broke down between Royal Mail and the union, a section of the CWU leadership opposed renewing the strikes. Instead of exposing those involved and warning postal workers of the machinations going on behind the scenes, the SWP dropped the issue—passing it off as a "serious mistake" and not inherent in the nature of the CWU bureaucracy.

In response to the CWU's recent agreement with Royal Mail, the *Socialist Worker* of October 16—published one day before the newspaper's web site revealed the contents of the deal offered—wrote as if a victory had been won: "The fierce battle between Royal Mail

and the postal workers' CWU union has seen management forced to make a new offer, despite them having repeated 'the offer is the offer' throughout the dispute."

The SWP deliberately tries to identify the rank and file who are engaged in a "fierce" battle against Royal Mail with the union bureaucracy, which is stabbing it in the back.

The party has repeatedly found time to bolster the man now spearheading efforts to secure a rotten compromise with Royal Mail, Dave Ward.

Ward only quit as a member of Labour's National Executive prior to the strike citing a "conflict of interests." Yet the *Socialist Worker* praised his speech at an October 9 CWU rally for his "scathing" attack on the government at the same time he was ordering workers to abandon unofficial action. His attack amounted to a pathetic complaint against the government for appointing Leighton and Crozier and meekly concluded, "I think that neither Gordon Brown, nor the Labour government, share our values."

From time to time, the SWP raises the issue of the CWU's affiliation to Labour, but always within the confines of supporting a redistribution of union funds towards other "left wing parties"—i.e., Respect and the SWP, and not for disaffiliation. It claims the political levy is "positive" because it ensures that Labour retains some connection to the "organised" working class and can be influenced. In 2004, George Galloway made it clear: "Respect is not calling on unions to disaffiliate," from the Labour Party, adding only that the unions must not be "wholly owned subsidiaries of Labour."

Paul Cox, the CWU's area processing rep for southwest London, which covers the Nine Elms mail centre—on unofficial strike last week—gave some indication of the hostility postal workers feel towards Labour when he told *Socialist Worker*, "The anti-Brown mood is even stronger on the shop floor. If I took the form to stop paying into the political fund around the Nine Elms mail centre at the moment, I would get a 95 percent take-up." However, he concluded, "If we are to maintain the fund, it must stop being exclusively for the Labour Party. And it should only be used to fund MPs and candidates that back our union's policies."

The main function of such a position, shared by Cox and the SWP, is to hold back a political break with the Labour Party.

Over the last few years, the SWP has developed opportunist relations with CWU General Secretary Billy Hayes, a member of the loosely aligned group of left union demagogues who emerged in 2003 and were dubbed the "awkward squad" by then Prime Minister Tony Blair. The SWP described them at the time as a breath of fresh air blowing through the musty offices of the Trade Union Congress, evidence that the unions were fundamentally healthy and their leaders about to lead a struggle against New Labour.

Hayes has been feted by the SWP, appearing at Stop the War Coalition meetings and the party's annual education school, "Marxism." At this year's event, he was paraded as a militant opponent of privatisation at the same time he was preparing the framework that allows Royal Mail to be handed over to big business. Within weeks of his appearance, Hayes joined the Compass Group, whose leaders played a pivotal in the New Labour project and now proclaim the virtues of the social market.

In 2002, the SWP's Jane Loftus became the first non-Labour Party member to be elected to the CWU national executive and in June 2007 became CWU President. Postal workers elected her in order to oppose the CWU's collaboration with privatisation and massive job cuts. Her voting record on the CWU executive is secret, but political opponents

have accused her of voting for the 2004 "Major Change" agreement between Royal Mail and the CWU (allegedly in the interests of maintaining left unity) and absenting herself from the ratification of the 2006 "Shaping the Future" document—accusations that *Socialist Worker* has not refuted.

These allegations were given substance in an exchange in 2002 between the SWP's Charlie Kimber and Hayes, who attacked the *Socialist Worker* for encouraging unofficial political strikes and contrasted its radical phrase mongering with the disciplined activity of the SWP's union officials, adding, "members of the Socialist Workers Party have not advanced such a policy at branch or national executive level." Since the CWU called off strikes on August 9 and entered secret talks with Royal Mail, Loftus, who regularly contributed to the *Socialist Worker*, has not issued or made a single statement to it on the concerted efforts of the CWU to betray the strikes.

The SWP is ensuring that workers do not learn the lessons involved in the collaboration of the CWU and the unions as a whole with successive Conservative and Labour governments. Instead, the *Socialist Worker* is stuffed with the opinions, the fears and selfish concerns of a union bureaucracy that will suppress any movement that threatens its privileges and unprincipled political relations with the Labour government. Union executive members receive a friendly welcome in the *Socialist Worker* and are reported uncritically. All the SWP's articles are couched as advice to the CWU on how to put its policies in a better light to union members.

The SWP argues that nothing has fundamentally changed since the founding of mass unions in the 1840s and that they "remain the best defence mechanism for working class people against the assault from the bosses and the government." If postal workers are to advance their struggle against the onslaught unleashed by Royal Mail, there must be a political rebellion against the CWU leadership and its left flank, the SWP. The Socialist Equality Party urges workers to reject any deal brokered by the CWU, take the struggle out of the hands of the union and set up independent rank-and-file committees based on the fight for a socialist perspective.



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