Britain: Vote ‘no’ and mobilize rank-and-file against CWU sell-out of postal workers

Socialist Equality Party (Britain)
17 November 2007

The following article is available in pdf *format.*

The Socialist Equality Party calls on postal workers to reject the deal cooked up between Royal Mail management and the Communication Workers Union (CWU) and mobilize to defend their jobs, wages and conditions.

The deal is a kick in the teeth to the 130,000 postal workers who have taken determined action and lost days in pay to safeguard their rights.

It is not simply that the agreement involves an unequal balance of trade-offs and compromises. The CWU has given Royal Mail *everything*, in a package it knows will have dire implications for thousands of jobs, working conditions and pension rights and give a green light for the further liberalization of the industry.

The ballot procedure is an essential element in this. Having called off a series of rolling strikes in August, the CWU has done the same again and is now using a long, drawn-out “consultation” period as a means of dissipating what was developing into a politically explosive dispute against not only the company, but the Labour government and the union tops.

What the deal means

The CWU claim that negotiations secured an increase in wages by 6.9 percent over 18 months, and to have won the “decoupling” of pension rights from the proposed deal.

But the true pay figure is just 5.4 percent over two years. The 1.5 percent additional payment included in the earlier figure is conditional on implementation of “total flexibility” that eradicates overtime and leaves postal workers at the beck and call of management. Hours are to be varied according to a form of flexitime—long and short days—in which offices match working hours to mail volume. An additional one-off payment of £175 is made up of money already earned through a bonus scheme.

The CWU is now involved in consultation with management over measures to close the final salary pension scheme to new entrants and raise the retirement age to 65. Those existing members who still retire at 60 will have to accept reductions in their pension entitlements, while Royal Mail has won the right to implement a two-tier scheme—with dire implications, especially for those workers involved in carrying heavy bags on their daily rounds.

CWU leader Billy Hayes has said that the executive recognizes that “the deal is not perfect,” but the union is indifferent to the impact on its members. As far as it is concerned, the sole purpose of the strikes was to force Royal Mail to accept that the union bureaucracy had a say in its “modernization” agenda.

The CWU now boasts that it has won an agreement “that cements our role, again, in the workplace and allows us to negotiate on all the major issues we face.” No matter that the pay award is an effective wage cut for workers and their families already struggling with rising mortgages and debts. Nor that the proposed changes to pensions amount to the legalized plunder of monies postal workers are entitled to as a right. The union has said it recognizes that the existing arrangements are “unsustainable,” without mentioning the fact that this is in large part due to Royal Mail taking a 17-year contribution “holiday.”

In addition, the union has effectively agreed the new start times in delivery offices that had sparked wildcat strike action in London, Scotland and the North West. And no mention has been made of what will happen to those postal workers who were sacked or suspended during the course of the dispute.

The radical groups and the “vote no” campaign

There is every possibility that the deal will be rejected in the ballot, whose result will be announced after November 27. Already more than 30 branches have rejected the offer, and strikes have broken out in Carlisle, Oxford and Scotland. But rejection of this derisory package is only a start. More fundamental conclusions must be drawn from the experiences of the last months.

The deal confirms that, even from the standpoint of its members’ immediate interests, the CWU cannot be considered a workers’ organization in any meaningful sense. Opposition to the deal therefore must be bound up with a rebellion against the union bureaucracy and the formation of rank-and-file committees to organize an industrial and political offensive against Royal Mail, the Labour government and its accomplices in the CWU.

Such a struggle can only take place in opposition to the campaign currently being organized by a number of lefts and radical groups, whose objective is to obscure the degeneration and rottenness of the entire union bureaucracy.

Leading the way is the Socialist Workers Party. After months of praising Billy Hayes and Dave Ward—the architects of the sell-out package—for standing up to Royal Mail, it is now doing its utmost to lend credibility to the five members of the 14-strong executive that voted against the deal. The *Socialist Worker* turns reality on its head when it baldly states that “Many of those in leading positions in the union recognise that the deal falls far short of what could have been achieved” without explaining why the *majority* have endorsed it, before going on to demand “postal workers across Britain *follow their lead* and use their vote in the ballot to vote no” (emphasis added).

What the SWP praise as leadership is nothing more than a pose of opposition with the aim of preventing an uprising against the union executive by postal workers disgusted at such an obvious sell-out. Not one

© World Socialist Web Site

of the five nay-sayers has called for a political struggle against their fellow bureaucrats. Indeed only one executive member, Dave Warren, has made any public statement at all about the deal.

Nothing is more indicative of the role of the SWP as a lickspittle of the union bureaucracy than the actions of its leading member, CWU President Jane Loftus. The *Socialist Worker* informs its readers that Loftus voted against the deal. If it had not done so, postal workers might be unaware that she had. Throughout weeks of dispute, Loftus has remained virtually silent. Despite her privileged access to the machinations of the union tops, she did nothing to alert postal workers to the sell-out that was being prepared. And, despite voting down the deal, she has made no call on postal workers to do the same. The SWP has made no accounting of Loftus's silence.

Another executive member with connections to one of the radical groups, Pete Keenlyside, voted for the deal. Workers Liberty has drawn a similar veil over the betrayal of its supporter.

For years the SWP has claimed that a revival of the workers' movement is dependent on militant industrial action and the elevation of "lefts" and "militants" to the leadership of the unions. Yet when, due to widespread hostility to the existing union bureaucracy, it succeeds in winning such a position its leading representative sits on her hands.

Postal workers are entitled to ask of the SWP, just why they should vote its members into leading positions when their actions differ in no fundamental sense from those they are supposedly replacing? Far from converting the union into a fighting organization, it is the radicals who have been co-opted into the bureaucracy and who also put their own position and substantial privileges before any defence of union members.

The SWP itself is not in the business of organizing a political struggle against the union bureaucracy. It is hostile to such a fight. It claims that the central problem facing the union is that it continues to pay a political levy to the Labour Party, without getting anything in return and calls for the union to institute "greater democratic control of the political fund."

Similar claims are made by all the radical groups active in the "vote no" campaign. But behind their left phrases and calls for action, their campaign is based on the premise that workers must confine themselves to trying to rein in the class collaboration of the union tops.

The Socialist Party states that rejection of the deal will "send a clear message" that postal workers will not "accept these attacks," while Workers Liberty states that even if the ballot does not "succeed in rejecting the deal, the No campaign could set the stage for a new CWU rank-and-file network that could put the brakes on further climbdowns."

Labour is a right-wing, big business organization whose sole concern is how to translate the needs of the transnational corporations and super-rich into government policy and enforce them on working people. It is under Labour that the greatest strides have been made in preparing the postal service for privatization. In line with the de-regulation of postal services across Europe, it aims at transforming the UK's delivery industry into a cash-cow for private shareholders and the City of London at the direct expense of workers' jobs and conditions.

Across the public sector, Labour has hived off essential services to private corporations while imposing a pay freeze on hundreds of thousands of workers, along with job cuts and other attacks on conditions. The defence of workers' living standards is integrally bound up with a political struggle against the Labour Party.

But the unions' relationship with Labour is not antagonistic, as the radicals claim, but mutually dependent. In Britain, more than anywhere else, the Labour Party was the creation of the trade unions. Both shared a perspective of opposing a socialist struggle against the capitalist profit system in favour of securing limited reforms.

Previously this perspective appeared to bear fruit, embodied in the state nationalizations of industry and the creation of the welfare state, but only at a cost of major betrayals whenever the fundamental interests of capital were threatened, such as with the calling off of 1926 General Strike.

The viability of reformism and trade unionism, however, was dependent on the nation state functioning as the basic unit of economic life, and the readiness of the ruling class to make concessions in the interests of maintaining social peace. All this has changed irrevocably over the last two decades.

Today production is organized globally, under the control of a handful of banks, vast corporations and the super-rich that monopolise and dictate the economic and social life of billions across the planet. Under conditions of cut-throat international competition, the life-long commitment of both Labour and the trade unions to the capitalist profit motive has seen these organizations transformed into the political tool of big business in implementing measures that effectively pauperise the working class and deprive it of its rights.

What way forward?

No effective struggle can be organized if this qualitative transformation in the relationship between the old labour organizations and working people is not consciously assimilated and made the basis for a new class offensive.

There is no question that militant action can and must be mobilized. An appeal by postal workers for support would meet with strong support, especially in the public sector where hundreds of thousands of jobs are threatened and a pay freeze is being imposed. It is precisely because the issues central to the postal dispute affect workers across Britain—and could ignite broad resistance to the Brown government—that the CWU called off the action. Just as importantly, major European centres such as Paris and Berlin are now seeing almost continuous industrial struggles—by train drivers and public sector employees—as workers internationally seek to resist the big business offensive against their jobs, pay and conditions.

This provides a powerful social basis for the formation of rank-and-file committees, organized across national boundaries and independently of the union bureaucracy. But such action cannot succeed unless it is connected to a new political strategy—one which proceeds from the urgent necessity of constructing a new mass socialist party.

Workers must reject the claim that it is economically impossible to guarantee secure decent paying jobs and publicly owned, high-quality essential services and utilities. When it comes to the interests of the class it represents, the government has been prepared to spend billions bailing out Northern Rock, or financing imperialist wars of conquest such as in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Workers' interests cannot be reconciled with the crisis-ridden profit system. Only the development of a planned socialist economy, which subordinates private greed to social need, can provide for working people and their families.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site