

Britain: The postal workers dispute and the role of “left” groups in the CWU

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A ballot of postal workers over the deal negotiated between Communication Workers Union (CWU) and Royal Mail recorded a 64 percent acceptance on a 64 percent turnout.

The “yes” vote came after sustained efforts by the CWU leadership to demobilise opposition to Royal Mail’s attacks on working conditions, pensions and wages. A campaign of industrial action—including eight days of official strikes starting in June—was halted by the CWU in mid-August, to begin two months of “consultations.”

The pretext for the retreat was Royal Mail’s agreement to slightly modify its pay award and to separate it out from discussions on pension reform. Even though the deal agreed is below the rate of inflation, and has done nothing to resolve Royal Mail’s demands for extensive changes in working conditions, the CWU executive endorsed it by nine votes to four.

In the weeks leading up to the membership ballot, the CWU bureaucracy insisted that the agreement “is the best that can be achieved in the circumstances” and claimed that postal workers will have the right to veto changes to pension rights through a separate ballot and to resist arbitrary changes sought by management on a local basis.

In a podcast to CWU members via the union’s website, Deputy General Secretary Dave Ward spoke as a barely concealed ally of management. The executive was recommending the deal because “for a serious trade union *looking to an employer going through difficult times*,” it was the best possible result.

“Change is happening all around you,” Ward told his members. “Competition is real,” the question is “do we bury our heads in the sand or rise to the challenge... and try to influence change.”

When the union heads speak of “influence,” what they mean is retaining their own position at the top table with management in forcing through changes to boost competitiveness at the direct expense of their members.

The CWU has stated that its objective is to ensure that “Royal Mail... thrives as a business” and is “able to compete effectively.” The pay deal is only one step towards this end. In a warning of what postal workers can expect on pension rights, Ward stated that the union “understand and support the need for pension reform... no change on pensions is an option that will cripple the company financially.”

According to the *Daily Mirror*, Royal Mail is to press ahead with its demands to close its final-salary scheme to new recruits and raise the retirement age from 60 to 65 years of age. The newspaper continued that previously, “A 40-year-old with 20 years service could expect to retire at 60 with a lump sum of £27,000 and an annual pension of £9,000,” but if the proposed reforms go through, “This would be cut

to £24,000 with the pension falling to just under £8,000.”

It is necessary to speak plainly. The “yes” vote is a significant setback in the struggle to develop the type of sustained offensive required to defend jobs and conditions. But if the union bureaucracy has proven persuasive in this instance, it is not because postal workers are now convinced their jobs and conditions are safe. Many realise that the deal is one of many swingeing cuts to be made as Royal Mail prepares for full “liberalisation.”

What the bureaucracy has going for it is the perfidy and cowardice of the so-called “left” groups organised within the union. It is they who played the crucial role in isolating and incapacitating the not insignificant number of postal workers prepared for a fight, thereby enabling the executive to carry the day.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has previously noted the invidious role played by Socialist Workers Party member and CWU President Jane Loftus. In July Loftus, alongside SWP supporter and vice president of the Public and Commercial Services union (PCS) Sue Bond, had called for united action in the public sector against then Chancellor Gordon Brown’s imposition of a pay freeze.

In the subsequent months, however, Loftus was conspicuous only by her absence. After apparently voting against the deal on the postal executive, she has maintained a studious silence throughout the weeks of “consultation.” Loftus chose not to campaign for a no vote amongst the membership, either amongst CWU members or within the pages of the *Socialist Worker*, having apparently declined to formally register her dissent (the prerequisite for an executive member publicly opposing an executive decision).

Loftus only broke cover at the Respect conference held on November 17, called following the split in the misnamed “Unity coalition” between the SWP and supporters of Respect’s only MP George Galloway. In her statement to what was in effect an SWP meeting she not only refused once more to take any public position on the executive’s deal, but claimed that, “for the first time I believe the CWU has started punching its weight in the political arena.”

In a mealy-mouthed statement, she was only prepared to admit that “we’ve got a settlement at the moment which is out of balance,” before continuing, “We are having a debate about reject or accept in our union and I will abide by the membership vote.”

Loftus has a long record as a toady of the CWU bureaucracy. Elected to the executive in 2002, in the run-up to the war on Iraq she reportedly prevented an amendment registering a vote of no confidence in Prime Minister Tony Blair by withdrawing the original motion. She also apparently voted in favour of the 2004 “Major Change” productivity agreement between Royal Mail and the CWU.

This is not an individual aberration. Though the SWP stated its

opposition to the deal, it did so while avoiding any suggestion of the need for a political struggle against the CWU executive. Instead it stressed that the leadership's decision "was not unanimous," that "Many of those in leading positions in the union recognise that the deal falls far short of what could have been achieved" and that "This dissent at the top of the union is a reflection of the deep unease inside the CWU."

Despite being in the midst of the bitterest dispute in Royal Mail, the SWP also chose not to publish its "rank and file" newspaper, the *Post Worker*. And it was only after remaining silent on the ballot result for almost a week that the SWP finally issued a five-line article, buried on its website, making no criticism whatsoever of the CWU while referring vaguely to the "likelihood of battles ahead."

It is not simply that the SWP chose to remove itself from the field of battle. This is an organisation which, in practice, has revealed itself to be a second fiddle to the union tops—fully prepared to sacrifice the interests of postal workers in order that its members can continue to occupy comfortable niches with the apparatus of the trade union—from the lofty heights of president down to branch officer level. That is why the SWP ensured that a sufficient number of those workers who looked to them for leadership concluded that there was no viable alternative to swallowing Royal Mail's demand.

It is no coincidence that the CWU wound down an increasingly bitter dispute just as the PCS were finally forced—after months of inaction—to announce a series of strikes beginning this week against jobs losses. The trade unions are in a combined offensive to sabotage any struggle against the government's pay freeze, lest it develop into a political rebellion against a Labour Party that is entirely in hock to big business.

The SWP's latest betrayal in the CWU was a continuation of its role in the PCS, where Sue Bond voted in favour of a deal raising the pensionable age of new employees in the civil service to 65. Following her "unfortunate" decision, as the *Socialist Worker* described it at the time, Bond supposedly ate humble pie and apologised. Another SWP member, Martin John, decided he would rather resign from the SWP than risk a breach with the bureaucracy over accepting the pension agreement.

The SWP has consistently promoted PCS general secretary Mark Serwotka, a former radical who recognises the need to cover his left-flank—as a genuine alternative within the union leadership with whom it is necessary to maintain "unity." But this is nothing more than unity with the bureaucracy against the working class.

According to the SWP, the union bureaucracy occupies a special intermediary ground, "balancing" between "the employers and the workers". In the words of SWP founder Tony Cliff, still routinely quoted by the party to this day, the responsibility of the "rank and file" is to "counter" the pressure of the "employers and state" by stiffening the bureaucracy's backbone.

This effort to confine workers to merely pressurising their existing leaderships is directed against the work of genuine Marxists to develop a conscious, socialist mass movement in a political rebellion against the bureaucracy and the creation of independent organisations of working class struggle.

Moreover, the SWP's claim that the bureaucracy defends, albeit hesitantly, the interests of working people conceals the vast changes that have taken place within the economic, social and political base of society—most significantly the globalisation of production which has torn the ground from under the national reformist strategies previously utilised by the union tops to ensure class peace.

The result has been the transformation of the social democratic and Stalinist parties and the trade unions into the tools of big business. Just as the social democratic parties in Britain, Germany and across the world have been the direct instruments for imperialist war and the assault on workers social gains, so too have the trade unions responded to the demands for international competition by enforcing management diktat.

Such is the evolution that the terms "yellow" or "sweetheart" unions could be equally applied to all the official unions, whether nominally left or right. In Germany, the major rail unions openly scabbed in the recent train drivers' strike, while in France it was the trade union leaders who entered into negotiations with Nicolas Sarkozy on the necessary reforms required by French capital to compete on the international arena, betraying the mass movement.

The SWP is not alone in trying to cover up the objective class significance of this shift. Whatever the criticisms made by the other radical groups of the SWP, they share the same bankrupt perspective.

Writing on the PCS climbdown on pensions, for example, the Socialist Party claimed that Serwotka and the "left Unity majority on the PCS NEC was crucial in forcing back the government's attack".

"Unfortunately", it continued, "the deal as it stands means that the government still wants the next generation of workers to retire later." Its report then went on to denounce all those at the Left Unity conference who had attacked the deal as a "sell-out", praising "the socialist leadership" of the PCS for refusing "to go on ultra-left adventures."

Such language is reminiscent of the crude anti-communist witch-hunting of the right.

Bill Mullins, the author of the above lines, and the Socialist Party are leading lights in the recent National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN) initiative. Sponsored by the Rail, Maritime and Transport workers union, the NSSN is the creature of the official bureaucracy. Its aim is to bolster the unions under conditions in which years of betrayal have reduced union membership from 12 million in the 1970s to 6.36 million today—just 29 percent of the total workforce. Amongst 16 to 24 year olds, the figure is even lower, at just 11 percent.

Behind all the Socialist Party's "left" phraseology in favour of rank and file movements, it has endorsed an organisation that is intended to strangle any such genuine "grassroots" initiatives. The "founding basis" of the NSSN states that it must consist only "of bona fide rank and file TUC affiliated trade union workplace representatives" and that it will "not encroach on the established organisation and recruitment activity or interfere in the internal affairs and elections of TUC affiliated trade unions or the functions of the TUC."

The SWP and the Socialist Party long ago rejected the fight for the political independence of the working class. Their hostility to this perspective—the only basis on which a genuine socialist movement can be built—has seen them march in lockstep with the bureaucracy to the right. Such is the close relationship between the former radicals and the union tops today that the two have merged seamlessly with one another.



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