

Britain: Union seeks to suppress postal workers' opposition to Royal Mail attacks

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In the months since the end of last year's strike, Royal Mail has stepped up its attacks on postal workers. It has altered their terms and conditions, ended the final salary pension scheme and started to close thousands of local post offices and dozens of mail delivery centres—starting with those at Bolton, Coventry, Crewe, Liverpool, Milton Keynes, Oldham, Oxford, Reading, Southend and Stockport.

Many of the old offices are in prime locations, and Royal Mail hopes to make a financial killing when they are sold. It will not be lost on postal workers that the planned closures will hit some of the most militant centres in the country, especially Liverpool and Oxford, whose workers were some of the last to return to work in last year's industrial action.

Reports suggest up to 35,000 jobs could be lost as a result of these changes, adding to the 48,000 that have disappeared since the Labour government came to power in 1997. But it is clear these figures are a conservative estimate. Of the jobs that remain, many will be turned into part-time, or even casual, posts, as has happened elsewhere in Europe.

The attacks won't stop there. The mail industry regulator, Postcomm, says Royal Mail's current business model is "unsustainable" and is demanding "a radical transformation of the governance and structure of Royal Mail"—i.e., privatisation. Royal Mail's chairman Allan Leighton and CEO Adam Crozier are also pushing for "private equity" investment. Both businessmen have the full support of the Labour government and the Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Minister John Hutton, who reappointed Leighton as chairman earlier this year.

Royal Mail's business has been hit by increasing use of e-mail and the Internet. In addition, the Labour government's enactment of European Union market liberalisation laws has allowed private operators to cream off the collection and delivery of bulk mail from large business customers, putting further pressure on the company's ability to meet the Universal Service Obligation, which guarantees collection and delivery to all addresses in the UK.

Further pressure for restructuring and privatisation is bound to come from the government-commissioned review into competition in the postal market chaired by businessman Richard Hooper, which is due to report shortly. The

government said its remit was to suggest how best to meet EU demands for total liberalisation of the postal market by the end of 2010. Its preliminary report published in May has already stated that "Returning to the days of statutory postal monopolies is not a policy option in the European Union" and points to further liberalisation as the only solution.

What can postal workers expect from the Communications Workers Union (CWU) in the face of such attacks? It is abundantly clear—from its past actions and its political perspective—that the bureaucracy has helped, is helping and will continue to help smooth the way for the privatisation of Royal Mail.

Last autumn, postal workers were involved in a bitter dispute over pay and conditions that escalated into a series of wildcat strikes threatening to get out of the bureaucracy's control. The CWU and its general secretary Billy Hayes stepped in and abruptly ended the strike without consulting the membership. For days, no one knew why it had been ended or what had been agreed with the company. By the end of the strike, hundreds of postal workers had stopped or threatened to stop paying the political levy to the Labour Party and thousands more were demanding the union end its links with the party.

The union bureaucracy set out to suppress these demands and prevent any moves towards an independent movement of the working class developing.

Militant workers sacked by Royal Mail management for alleged incidents during the strike, such as posting comments on websites or for "non co-operation" with management's diktats since it ended, have been left high and dry. The CWU ordered postal workers striking in their support to return to work and limited solidarity to a national appeal to pay the sacked workers wages while they awaited the outcome of industrial tribunals.

The bureaucracy then told postal workers to put their faith in the Hooper Review. Hayes boasted that the review only happened after some "serious pressure" from the union. When the preliminary report was published, he claimed it was a "further success" for the CWU because Hooper stated the obvious—that so far, liberalisation had benefited big business and hurt the general public. He then feigned surprise that Postcomm had called for further privatisation when everyone

knows that this is the aim of all the representatives of big business—the financial institutions, the EU and the Labour government.

At the union's conference in June, the bureaucracy fought bitterly to divert opposition to its bankrupt perspective of putting pressure on Royal Mail management and the Labour government.

The supporters of various radical tendencies tried to get a motion passed calling for disaffiliation from the Labour Party and for the CWU to help create a "New Workers' Party." But this call was defeated by a vote of about seven to one, and another, which suggested that individual branches should be allowed to support non-Labour Party candidates, only received the support of a handful of delegates.

Those calling for the building of a new workers' party reject the possibility of this being based on a Marxist programme. Denouncing Tony Blair and Gordon Brown for their betrayal of "traditional" labour values, they stand for a return to old-style reformist policies and insist that the unions must lead such a party despite their degeneration matching that of Labour itself.

Hayes led the call for the union to maintain its link with Labour. He claimed the only alternative was a Conservative government or the debacle that the rail union RMT found itself in after throwing its support behind the Scottish Socialist Party. The RMT was expelled from the Labour Party, and then the SSP split and went into electoral meltdown.

In reality, it is popular opposition to Labour that has led to what was once thought impossible—the resurrection of the Tory party and the victory of right-winger Boris Johnson as London Mayor. And the SSP embraced nationalism and made clear that its central aim was to forge an alliance with the Scottish National Party and its business backers.

In the end, the conference overwhelmingly voted for an executive motion that called for the government to "change course" by March 2009 or face the "possibility" of the union withdrawing its funding for a future election campaign, a threat that has been made at previous conferences but never carried out. The conference called for a demonstration at the Labour Party conference in Manchester at the end of September.

Hayes insisted that there was still life in the Labour Party corpse, claiming, "I don't accept that defeat's inevitable. There's everything still to play for, but we need a new economic agenda to win back these lost votes."

Labour MP for Dagenham Jon Cruddas was wheeled out to urge the assembled bureaucrats to join him in a fight "to change the Labour Party for the better." But all he could come up with was a feeble call for a moratorium on future private sector involvement in the public sector. Cruddas was a key figure in the New Labour project and one of then-Prime Minister Tony Blair's closest political advisors at the time the Labour government started to liberalise postal services, passed the Postal Services Act 2000 and appointed Leighton and Crozier to carry out a "radical transformation" of Royal Mail.

More recently, CWU leaders have stated they are not against mail centre closure in principle—only that it is being done outside their control. With the agreement of the CWU, Royal Mail has already set about "collapsing" duties in various mail centres, in which postal workers have to share out extra delivery rounds without being paid.

CWU Deputy General Secretary Dave Ward complained about the threat to close the first 10 centres, that "Royal Mail has reneged on an agreed process by prematurely announcing this decision. The consultation period has not come to an end making their announcement irresponsible and misleading. The CWU acknowledges that changes are needed to modernise the postal industry, but a balance needs to be struck which meets the business plan, service standards and social and economic concerns."

"Royal Mail needs to bring the workforce along with these changes in order for the business to be successful so we call on them to remove their preferred option, return to the negotiating table and have a genuine and meaningful consultation over the future of mail centres," Ward added.

Union stewards have agreed at a national meeting that there will be a ballot for industrial action, but only at the "affected" mail centres. Such a piecemeal response is a recipe for disaster in a situation where Prime Minister Gordon Brown, faced by the worst economic crisis in 70 years, has recently hired Standard Life Chairman Gerry Grimstone, the man who was in charge of Margaret Thatcher's privatisation programme, to help sell a large number of state assets, top of which must be Royal Mail.

The degeneration of the old workers' organisations is the product of their nationalist and reformist programme and organisation. When production was predominantly organised within national borders, it was possible to extract concessions from the employers through strikes and protests, without challenging the essential framework of the profit system. Today, the union bureaucracy has abandoned such a struggle in direct response to the ability of the major corporations to organise globally and accepts their assertions that attacks on jobs, working conditions and pensions are necessary in order to beat international competition.

If postal workers are to advance their struggle against the ongoing privatisation of Royal Mail and further job losses, it is necessary to set up rank-and-file committees in a political rebellion against their own leadership and that of the Labour government and take up the struggle to construct a new socialist party independent of the degenerate trade unions.



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