

# Britain: Postal union seeks to prevent national strike

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20 July 2009

The July 17 “national day of action” proclaimed by the Communication Workers Union (CWU) saw just 12,000 postal workers take strike action.

The CWU bureaucracy has opposed growing demands for a national strike. Prior to the locally based strikes, concentrated in a handful of cities, the CWU had received a total of 400 demands from union branches for ballots for industrial action. By the day of action this had reached almost 500.

Union officials have had to employ extra staff to deal with the scale of requests due to growing impatience with the CWU’s deliberate delaying tactics.

Ballot results are exceptionally high in favour of strikes, as workers want to prevent London offices being isolated in their fight to resist Royal Mail’s assault on jobs and working conditions. The present assault is based on a 2007 agreement reached between the CWU and Royal Mail. The CWU’s sole concern is to resist any unified offensive by postal workers, dividing workers by what it calls balloting “unit by unit,” in order to prevent an all-out confrontation with Royal Mail.

The CWU acknowledges that postal workers face a possible 40 percent cut in staffing levels. There are also complaints of staff being bullied into working through breaks and into their own time, the tearing up of agreed attendance patterns leading some to work an extra 46 days a year and others losing up to £6,000 a year in pay, compulsory transfers and forcible imposition of changes to working practices. All of this is listed in a letter of protest sent to the head of Royal Mail, Adam Crozier, and the Labour government.

But the main complaint of the CWU is that Royal

Mail is obstructing “modernisation.” One representative summed up the position of the union as, “We’ve had the attacks. Where’s the modernisation?”

A supposedly “national” rally held on Friday at Westminster Hall, opposite the Houses of Parliament, attracted just 900 workers out of 10,000 postal staff in London.

One of those on the podium was Labour MP Kate Hoey. Speaker after speaker praised various Labour MPs as the allies of postal workers in the fight against the planned part-privatisation of Royal Mail, despite it being the government itself that has been seeking to push this through.

When the floor was opened up for contributions and questions, discontent with the CWU’s conduct of the strikes was manifest. One speaker from Kentish Town described his desire for strikes “whether official or unofficial” and urged maximum unity with rail and tube workers. Other speakers demanded to know why there was no national ballot. Local union officials from different depots described a growing frustration with delays in organising ballots that could lead to unofficial action.

In response, Bob Gibson of the CWU national leadership urged support for “modernisation,” stating to the audience that it was not possible for workers to have a pension in “a crap industry.” In essence, this can only mean that unless postal workers agree to speedups and job cuts, then the pension scheme will be closed.

According to Gibson, UNITE members in the managerial grades were involved in strikebreaking activities during the strike. Managers have been organised into a mini-strikebreaking force, with local managers and others bussed in from areas not affected by the strikes.

He failed to mention that CWU General Secretary

Billy Hayes had instructed postal workers that mail redirected to non-striking depots should not be blocked because such action is unofficial. Despite these threats, a significant section of workers continue to refuse to handle re-directed mail.

In the first series of strikes in London in June, as a consequence of rolling strikes CWU members not directly involved had also been instructed by the CWU to cross picket lines or face legal sanction.

Gibson stated that, although he understood the need for a national strike, he thought the CWU's strategy of balloting "unit by unit" was working, and the union would continue with it.

Before the strikes, Dave Ward had offered Royal Mail a three-month moratorium on strikes to discuss the detail of restructuring demanded and how to implement it in the most orderly fashion. During an interview with ITN at the Mount Pleasant Distribution centre picket line, he reiterated his offer of a no-strike deal. Off camera, he told the ITN reporter that the CWU would pursue "modernisation" more aggressively than Royal Mail management and that management incompetence was holding back the pace of change.

Ward's closing remarks to the rally were premised by an admission that he was aware of growing criticism of the CWU's role in the strikes and the tactics deployed. But he insisted that "we" have to find a way of "adapting" to change in a competitive market and "we" are not frightened of change.

He criticised Crozier for failing to "engage with the trade unions." Despite Business Secretary Peter Mandelson having been unable to find a buyer for Royal Mail, the CWU were not "popping the champagne corks," he added. A city banker employed by Royal Mail had said that the pension scheme would have to be closed, and the assault by Royal Mail would involve "compulsory redundancies."

The scale of the attacks could only be resisted with a national strike, he admitted, but refused to say he would organise one. Instead the pattern of isolated strikes will continue.

In this he was ably assisted by the ex-radical groups, notably the Socialist Party and the Socialist Workers Party. Both have members who occupy leading

positions in the CWU; Jane Loftus of the SWP is vice-president of the CWU.

Neither party has raised a single difference of principle with the strategy of the CWU leadership. Both have refused to discuss the implications of the CWU's policy statements and how they support job losses, rationalisation, efficiency drives and depot restructuring based on the 2007 agreement brokered by the TUC. At the rally, Charlie Kimber, the SWP's industrial editor, shook Ward's hand in front of a contingent of postal workers.

The Socialist Equality Party issued a statement to the demonstration, urging a rejection of the CWU's 2007 agreement and all collaboration with Royal Mail as the starting point of a genuine struggle to defend jobs, conditions and the postal service. Only in a political rebellion against the CWU and through the formation of rank-and-file committees based on a socialist perspective can such a struggle be conducted.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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