

British postal workers union calls phony “national day of action”

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The Communication Workers Union (CWU), representing Britain’s postal workers, has called a phony “national day of action” for today. In reality, no national action is being planned in the face of an escalating threat to jobs and working conditions in preparation for the partial privatisation of the Royal Mail.

Last week, postal workers in London took part in a three-day rolling strike in London, and two days of strikes took place in London and Scotland last month. These were isolated disputes and took place only after an offer by the CWU of a three-month moratorium on strike action was rejected by management.

This pattern continues. On July 17, strikes will only take place in London, Edinburgh, Bristol, Darlington, Stoke, Plymouth, Leamington Spa, Norfolk and Essex—involving 17 delivery services and just four processing and distribution centres that have already balloted for industrial action.

CWU Deputy General Secretary Dave Ward states that the national day of action “is in response to an ever growing number of requests for industrial action from postal workers across the country, who feel let down by Royal Mail management. We have almost 400 ballot requests at the moment with more coming daily. Without progress this could effectively turn into a national strike.”

The CWU intends to prevent a national strike at all costs and to channel postal workers anger behind a series of stunts, such as delivering a letter and postcard to Royal Mail’s Chief Executive Adam Crozier and the Labour government’s Business Secretary Lord Mandelson. After these letters have “arrived safely at their addresses a national balloon release will take place with thousands of balloons rising above Royal Mail workplaces across the UK.”

Meanwhile, Ward states, “We have renewed our offer of a three-month no-strike deal to Royal Mail in return for

meaningful talks over modernisation.”

Its own participation in “modernisation” and the suppression of opposition to this amongst its members are the sole concern of the bureaucracy. It accuses Royal Mail of abandoning “the final phase of the 2007 Pay and Modernisation agreement that mandated the company and CWU to negotiating modernization” and “set out a phased approach by which the CWU and Royal Mail, together and by agreement, could work together to introduce the changes that our industry needs.”

By its efforts to impose Royal Mail’s dictates, the CWU has created a situation where, by its own admission, managers are now “unilaterally imposing route revisions, shift changes, driving up workloads and slashing jobs.”

Postal workers have been involved in numerous bitter struggles since the plans for a “new commercial structure” were first revealed in 1999 by then Trade Secretary Peter Mandelson. The Royal Mail was confronting huge technological developments in the growth of electronic mail, increasing the demand for postal services to cut costs and improve efficiency. At the same time, the globalisation of trade and industry ended its monopoly status as a domestic carrier. The CWU responded by urging postal workers to support the Royal Mail in its efforts to compete in the liberalised European postal market, as demanded by the European Union.

The CWU welcomed Mandelson’s 1999 plan as an alternative to “old-style nationalisation and raw market-driven privatization.”

In 2006 the Labour government opened the service to private postal operators. Within two years, rival companies were carrying more than 40 percent of bulk mail delivery, leaving Royal Mail with less profitable sectors like personal letters.

Last year the government commissioned an inquiry into the postal service under Richard Hooper, with the support of the CWU. The mail industry regulator Postcomm

inevitably concluded from the Hooper review that further privatisation was necessary.

The CWU has no intention of opposing further attacks on postal workers. Its own policy document accepts that “the modernisation of Royal Mail is both a necessity and a priority.... The CWU is willing to fully embrace the speedy introduction of new automation / technology and recognise the need to reduce costs and increase efficiency. We know this will mean a reduction in overall jobs, rationalisation of the Mail Centre Network and more flexible delivery spans.”

The CWU offers itself as the best mechanism for imposing job cuts and speed-ups due to its specialised ability to suppress the opposition of postal workers. Already tens of thousands of jobs have been lost. City centre post offices have been sold off and the profitable bulk mail collection handed over to the private sector.

In 2007 postal workers took national strike action over attacks on pay, conditions and pension rights. The CWU told workers to return to work so they could begin a two-month “consultation” period with Royal Mail. The bureaucracy declared that a slight modification of the pay agreement was the best possible outcome. CWU President Jane Loftus, a member of the Socialist Workers Party, refused to campaign for a “no” vote and took no public position on the deal.

The agreement paved the way for far-reaching reforms of pension arrangements. Last year Royal Mail abolished the final salary pension scheme, and raised the standard retirement age to 65. All existing members of the pension scheme were moved to a career average scheme, while new starters were put into a “money purchase fund.” Royal Mail currently faces a pensions’ deficit of £6 billion, which could rise to £9 billion.

The Royal Mail insists that its present round of attacks is only what was signed up to in 2007.

As an alternative to the Labour government's plan to sell off 30 percent of Royal Mail, the CWU has backed the proposal by Labour's Compass Group to set up a “not-for-profit dividend company” along the lines of the BBC Trust or Network Rail. This effort to rescue a beleaguered Labour government was accompanied by the proposed three-month no-strike deal. With a conference mandate for national strike action, Ward offered Royal Mail a “useful cooling-off period” and “a final opportunity to bring about the successful transformation of the business before major industrial conflict becomes necessary.”

Mandelson has now been forced to suspend the planned part-privatisation, but only because he could not find a

credible buyer in the midst of the worsening recession. CWU General Secretary Billy Hayes responded by declaring that the government had “listened to the British public” and pledged his union's support in “modernising Royal Mail in the public sector.”

In fighting privatisation and job losses, postal workers face the combined hostility of management, the government, the opposition parties and the media. For its part the CWU functions as a fifth column and a loyal partner of Royal Mail.

Postal workers must organise independently of the CWU, establishing rank-and-file committees to coordinate action across the whole postal sector and with other workers facing similar attacks.

Workers must intervene on a political perspective that reflects their independent class interests. Global technological developments in telecommunications underscore that the working class is an international class, united by the production process and exploited by the same companies and corporations. An international movement of the working class is necessary to organise production on a new, socialist basis, for public need not corporate profit.

An industrial offensive can only succeed if it is part of such a socialist strategy, rejecting the capitalist market as the basis for economic and social life. This requires the building of a new party of the working class, the Socialist Equality Party.



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