

Britain: Postal union attempts to control escalating strike wave

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British postal workers have stepped up a series of rolling strikes against attacks on jobs and conditions. The stoppages come ahead of a national ballot organised next month by the Communication Workers Union (CWU). Overtime bans are in operation and wildcat actions are breaking out. They indicate the anger and determination of postal workers, as well as the continued efforts of the CWU to contain this militancy.

The CWU, which has sought to prevent any coordinated national action, has again divided up the stoppages.

Stoke-on Trent processing (but not delivery) staff went on a continuous action from August 11. Up until August 24, one-day strikes are taking place in different locations, covering London, the South West, Midlands, Yorkshire and Northamptonshire. Depending on the day, the action involves workers in different sectors of the postal service, from deliveries, collections, sorting and drivers.

In addition, 65 postal workers at Wallasey have walked out on an unofficial strike against imposed changes in delivery routes.

This follows strikes and demonstrations this summer against Royal Mail's assault on jobs and conditions. The "Pay and Modernisation" agreement reached between management and the CWU to end strikes in 2007 has led directly to managers "unilaterally imposing route revisions, shift changes, driving up workloads and slashing jobs," the union admits.

The CWU has sought to stress its role in the orderly and successful streamlining of Royal Mail as a business concern. A recent Postal Executive document, "A Credible CWU Alternative," stated this plainly:

"The CWU accept that the modernisation of Royal Mail is both a necessity and a priority.... The CWU...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."

At the same time, the CWU acknowledges that postal workers face a possible 40 percent cut in staffing levels.

During the current strikes, managers have threatened to dock the pay of those postal workers not involved in the action if they refuse to cross picket lines. Drivers in the East Midlands, Warrington and the Home Counties have already been penalised.

There is no question that the increasingly provocative actions of management have the blessing of the Labour government. Having failed to find an acceptable buyer for Royal Mail, Business Secretary Lord Mandelson reluctantly shelved part-privatisation plans for the postal service. But Mandelson has made clear the government's determination to force through "modernisation" changes in order to help attract a future bidder.

Rejecting union pleas for the government to bring Royal Mail management to heel, Mandelson made clear the current assault was at Labour's insistence. "Time and again in the past, the CWU has asked ministers to intervene in their disputes and their strikes to frustrate Royal Mail modernisation," he told the press. "I have instructed this will not happen."

In the face of an overwhelming vote for strike action at the CWU conference, CWU Deputy General Secretary Dave Ward offered management a three-month moratorium on strike action in return for "meaningful" talks on modernisation.

Subsequently, the union had to assign additional staff

to deal with the increasing requests to ballot for industrial action, which had reached nearly 500 ahead of last month's "day of action." In an effort to dissipate this, the CWU has carried out "unit by unit" balloting. Workers were separated by area, and by function within a depot. This led to the situation in June where non-striking CWU members in London were told by union officials to cross picket lines or face legal sanction.

It is only with the greatest reluctance that the CWU is now proceeding with a national ballot between September 9 and September 27. The union has stopped considering local requests for ballots pending the national ballot.

Ward has been explicit in his hostility to any industrial action, and has repeatedly signalled his willingness to sabotage such action in favour of the bankrupt perspective of lining up with management to ensure that Royal Mail "thrives as a business." He is clearly unhappy at the prospect of a national ballot. In a press statement last week he said that "Royal Mail...is not interested in the concerns or ideas of the CWU. While this attitude continues we have no choice than to press ahead with a national ballot for strike action."

Ward then repeated his offer of a three-month strike moratorium. In an August 19 press statement he again repeated the "offer of a no strike deal if the company takes a step back on this round of cuts and negotiates on the bigger picture of the much needed modernisation of the company."



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