

Britain: Postal workers discuss disaffiliation from Labour, ballot for national strike

Paul Bond
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Britain's postal workers, already engaged in a rolling series of one-day regional strikes against attacks on jobs and conditions, begin balloting this week for national action. The ballot closes on October 8 and is expected to result in national strike action shortly afterwards.

Postal workers are also again proposing that the Communication Workers Union (CWU) end its financial support for the Labour Party. Postal workers in London have launched a consultative ballot on continued financial support for Labour, while CWU delegates to the Trades Union Congress have tabled a motion calling for a widespread review of union affiliation. A motion on disaffiliation was tabled at this year's CWU conference, but not debated.

These developments are welcome, but in and of themselves are not enough. They pose serious political challenges.

Royal Mail is determined to impose drastic speed-ups, increase workloads and slash jobs. Managers have already imposed route revisions and shift changes. Postal workers face a possible 40 percent reduction in staffing levels.

This attack has been fully supported by the Labour government. Having failed to find a satisfactory bidder, Business Secretary Lord Mandelson was reluctantly forced to shelve plans for the part-privatisation of Royal Mail. He made clear that this is still the ambition, stressing that the "modernisation" of the Royal Mail was necessary to attract a bidder successfully in future.

Mandelson also declared his support for management in forcing this through. He told the press he had "instructed" ministers not "to intervene...to frustrate Royal Mail modernisation."

Postal workers have shown their determination to

fight management's attacks. There was an overwhelming vote for strike action at the CWU annual conference earlier in the year. The CWU even had to assign additional staff to deal with requests to ballot for industrial action. Almost 500 such requests had been received by June. Along with the rolling official one-day actions, there have also been increasing numbers of unofficial actions.

If the militancy and determination of postal workers is not in doubt, the same cannot be said for the union that claims to represent them. The CWU leadership has done everything in its power to prevent any national action thus far. The response of the CWU bureaucracy to the overwhelming vote for strike action was to offer government and management a three-month moratorium. Despite the government's clear sanctioning of Royal Mail's attacks, the CWU continues to appeal to factions of the Labour Party for support.

The CWU leadership has been concerned to offer itself as the mechanism for ensuring that the Royal Mail "thrives as a business," in the words of Deputy General Secretary Dave Ward. It has repeatedly signalled its willingness to go along with job cuts and speed-ups.

To prevent coordinated national action, the union called out postal workers by depot and function. Faced with escalating demands for regional strike ballots, they were finally forced to call a national "day of action" in July. This was no change of their position. It was reported that day that Dave Ward was insisting that the CWU would pursue "modernisation" more aggressively and consistently than management.

The petty-bourgeois left groups, well represented on the National Executive of the union, have made concerted efforts to prevent any break ranks with the

CWU bureaucracy. The Socialist Workers Party, whose member Jane Loftus is vice president, did not produce its paper the *Post Worker* for this year's conference, nor did it hold its regular fringe meeting.

The Socialist Party has two members on the National Executive. One, Gary Jones, acknowledged that post workers saw the moratorium proposal as a retreat, but argued that it was "seen as a stalling tactic by many...to keep the public on the union's side."

The CWU eventually called a national ballot because of the mounting anger of postal workers, but the union leadership continues to offer its services to management. The statement announcing the strike ballot repeats the strike moratorium offer in exchange for its right to collaborate with management, saying, "Change is a reality with modernisation of the company."

This means accepting in the main the job losses demanded by management.

The current wave of attacks was sanctioned by the "Pay and Modernisation" agreement reached by management and the CWU at the end of the 2007 dispute. Earlier this year the union wrote that it "recognise[d] the need to reduce costs and increase efficiency." This would mean "a reduction in overall jobs, rationalisation...and more flexible delivery spans."

Any successful struggle against privatisation and job losses requires the formation of independent rank-and-file committees to coordinate action with workers in communications and other industries facing similar attacks across the whole of Europe. Such coordinated strike action can only be achieved by taking the dispute out of the hands of the CWU bureaucracy.

Above all it requires a new socialist political perspective and the organisation of production for social need, not for corporate profit. The CWU, in contrast, is wholly committed to the defence of capitalism. At a TUC fringe meeting on Sunday, CWU General Secretary Billy Hayes again defended the market, saying it "does some things well." The CWU bureaucracy's adherence to the market puts it firmly on the side of the Labour government and its big business backers.

It is a healthy sign, therefore, that postal workers are again discussing ending affiliation to the Labour Party, but such a move would only be a first step. The union's leadership does not want to break from Labour, but

wants only to register a protest by possibly withdrawing funding from some members of parliament, in order to prevent a more decisive political break from the bankrupt programme shared by Labour and the CWU. A CWU spokeswoman stressed that the TUC motion was intended to "rebuild a coalition of support for Labour."

Some within the TUC have seen the CWU motion as a nod towards a small group of "left" Labour MPs around John McDonnell to strengthen their hand within the party. This is intended as a safety valve to take pressure off the Labour Party, and offers no way forward for workers. McDonnell himself has insisted that Labour "has to recognise" an "element of frustration" in affiliated unions.

Postal workers face the necessity of a complete organisational and political break, both from the big-business oriented Labour Party and from the CWU bureaucracy that ties workers to it. This break will only be achieved through the building of an independent party of the working class, which speaks for the interests of working people internationally and fights for the socialist reorganisation of society. We call on all workers who want to fight for that programme to contact the Socialist Equality Party.



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