

Britain: Postal workers call for disaffiliation from Labour during strike ballot

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This week has seen a further wave of 24-hour strikes by postal workers. Around 15,000 workers are thought to be involved in strikes affecting large parts of the country. In a further indication of growing radicalisation, a recent consultative ballot amongst London members of the CWU voted overwhelmingly for the union to end its political subsidy to the Labour Party.

On Tuesday most of the London delivery offices were out, and today strikes are due to take place in delivery offices across the Bristol area. There have also been a significant number of wildcat actions. The official strikes are regional and sectional, and are taking place during a ballot of all Communication Workers Union (CWU) members for national strike action. That ballot closes October 8, and is likely to return a vote in favour of action.

As a consultative ballot, the vote to end funding for the Labour Party is not binding. But the 96 percent vote against continued affiliation is a clear sign of the anger against the government and its attack on jobs and conditions at Royal Mail. The postal service is looking to impose drastic speed-ups and increase workloads. Managers have already imposed route revisions and shift changes and postal workers face a possible 40 percent cut in staffing levels.

Royal Mail is in crisis over the deficit in the company's pension fund, which is predicted to reach £10 billion. This is largely due to successive Conservative and Labour governments taking a 13-year contributions "holiday."

Royal Mail has tried to pass responsibility for this deficit on to postal workers. In 2008 the company abolished its final salary scheme. New workers had to accept a "money purchase fund," and existing scheme members were moved to a career average plan. Royal

Mail also raised the standard retirement age to 65, with a view to cutting its pension contribution rate from 30 percent to around 11 percent of staff salary.

These attacks on postal workers have been fully supported by the Labour government. Business Minister Lord Mandelson shelved his plans for part-privatization of Royal Mail due to the financial crisis, but the government retains the ambition to see this through eventually. In the summer Mandelson "instructed" ministers not to obstruct "modernization" of the company. During the privatization discussions ministers tried to exploit the pension deficit to force through the sell-off.

For the CWU leadership, the consultative ballot on funding is merely a bargaining ploy with the government. Deputy General Secretary Dave Ward, who has repeatedly made clear his hostility to strike action, greeted the London ballot result with the comment, "There are some fantastic people in the Labour Party, but as a union we can't go on like this."

The CWU tabled an emergency resolution at this week's Labour Party conference. General Secretary Billy Hayes said the government as sole shareholder had "the obligation and responsibility" to resolve the crisis in Royal Mail's pension deficit.

In fact, ministers had previously threatened to end taxpayer underwriting of the pensions fund unless a private buyer were found.

After the resolution was passed, the CWU was back to portraying Labour as the saviour of postal workers. The CWU Web site claimed that "delegates [at the conference]...unanimously backed our union's call on the government to take immediate steps to take responsibility for the Royal Mail pensions deficit."

Although the resolution obtained wide support at the conference, it plays no formal role in determining

policy.

There is, in fact, little difference between the New Labour and its big business agenda and the trade unions.

The current conditions in the postal service are the direct result of the deal reached between the CWU and Royal Mail at the end of the 2007 national dispute. Royal Mail has repeatedly announced that these cuts are simply part of that deal, after which it was encouraged to implement the changes to pension plans.

The CWU staged a consultative ballot on these changes, but made no provision for strike action. It has repeatedly expressed its agreement to “modernisation.” Earlier this year it wrote that it recognized the “need to reduce costs and increase efficiency,” which meant “a reduction in overall jobs, rationalization...and more flexible delivery spans.”

The middle-class, pseudo-left groups, who form a substantial part of the CWU apparatus, have seized on the consultative ballot to bolster the trade union bureaucracy. The Socialist Workers Party, whose member Jane Loftus is union vice president, acknowledged the London ballot was not binding, but said it would add to “growing pressure on the leadership to honour the union’s conference policy of balloting the entire membership” on disaffiliation.

The Socialist Party (SP), which has two members on the union’s National Executive, claimed recently, “The biggest obstacle to privatization has always been the postal workers’ union. This dispute is not about modernization...it’s about Royal Mail and the government trying to smash the CWU.”

But Royal Mail and the Labour government are perfectly satisfied with the CWU so long as it does what it asked of it. What they now demand is that the union take further measures to discipline its own members.

For its part, every time postal workers have indicated their readiness for strike action, Dave Ward has publicly renewed his offer of a three-month strike moratorium to management.

Despite mounting criticism, the union continued to cling to its regional and local strike action policy. Having finally agreed to a ballot on national action after months of delays, the CWU is at pains to pledge its loyalty to the best interests of Royal Mail. In the video calling for a “yes” vote, Ward stated that the

union had made “genuine offers of no-strike deals...guaranteed,” to management and their own request in return was to “stop the arbitrary attacks on your jobs and your terms and conditions.” Hayes calls the vote “a referendum about your future,” but says, “that future is a successful modernized Royal Mail.”

Its effects can be seen in wildcat actions in Scotland. Last Friday Sighthill sorting office workers were on strike, but drivers were not. When a driver refused to cross the picket line, he was sent home without pay by managers, prompting a walkout by other workers.

A Royal Mail spokeswoman noted that “delivery drivers and postal workers are not on strike at the other offices.”

Graham Steedman, local area processing representative of the CWU, said it was “unfortunate that the actions of management have brought this about.” In fact, this is the result of the CWU’s policy. During strikes in the summer Hayes instructed postal workers that mail redirected to non-striking depots should not be blocked because such action would be unofficial.

Any successful struggle against privatization and job losses requires the formation of independent rank-and-file committees to coordinate with workers in communications and other sectors under similar attack. Above all, postal workers face the necessity of a complete organizational and political break from both Labour and the CWU. These pro-capitalist organisations can never be the basis for a successful fight in defence of the gains and conditions of the working class.

For this a new party is required; a party that speaks for the interests of working people internationally and fights for the socialist reorganization of society for social need, not corporate profit. We call on all workers who want to fight for that programme to contact the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSWP and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wswp.org/contact