

Britain: Postal workers face a political struggle against Labour government

Socialist Equality Party
20 October 2009

Postal workers confront a coordinated campaign to defeat their strike in defence of jobs and conditions, drawn up and executed by Royal Mail and the Labour government.

Management has recruited 30,000 temporary workers as the centrepiece of a scabbing operation that also involves management personnel who are members of the Unite union. TNT, Britain's largest private mail operator, is seeking the right to permanently use its own employees to deliver mail door-to-door by offering their assistance to the government to break the strike.

A leaked "Strategic Overview" from the Royal Mail states that it wants to utilize the strike as an "enabler" of its aims—the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs and the imposition of speed-up in preparation for the part-privatization of letter deliveries. Management wants to slash staffing levels by up to 40 percent. Some 16,000 jobs are reported to be at risk. Royal Mail has already shed 50,000 jobs since 2002.

The Labour government backs this strike-breaking to the hilt. Business Secretary Peter Mandelson has repeatedly declared that "modernization" of Royal mail must be imposed. The leaked Royal Mail document states that, if the Communication Workers Union (CWU) does not agree to impose the attacks demanded, there is "*shareholder*, customer and internal support for implementation of change without agreement." The government is the only "*shareholder*" in Royal Mail.

Every day the media is filled with a vitriol not witnessed since the 1984-85 miners' strike. The *Financial Times* leads the way in urging that the post workers must be taken on and defeated. Though the strike would cause "long-term harm," it insisted that this "does not mean Royal Mail executives should seek to avert the strike at any cost. This is a battle they must

fight—and win."

What accounts for the severity of the reaction to the post strike within ruling circles? Its purpose is to threaten and intimidate not only postal staff, but workers across the entire public sector who face tens of billions in spending cuts, whoever wins the next General Election.

This agenda is dictated by the major corporations, banks and the super-rich, for whom the Labour government speaks. The near total collapse of the world's banking system last year was only prevented by handing over billions of taxpayers' money to the very people whose unbridled and criminal speculation precipitated this crisis. The bill for this is massive, standing at £1.26 trillion already, and with estimates of hundreds of billions more in losses still to come.

The ruling class, the Labour government and all the opposition parties are determined to claw back this money through the decimation of vital social services, massive job losses, wage cuts, and brutal levels of exploitation for those in work. In the meantime, the stock markets are once again soaring, and the banks are paying out millions in bonuses—all paid for with public funds.

The attempt to make an example of the postal workers cannot be combated under the leadership of the CWU bureaucracy, which wants nothing more than a shabby compromise so that it can restore its relations with management.

Ever since it signed the 2007 Pay and Modernisation Agreement, the CWU has attempted to sabotage all opposition to Royal Mail's plans. It was only in June, under sustained pressure from post workers, that it acceded to rolling regional and divisional 24-hour stoppages as a means of blocking demands for a national strike that it eventually could no longer deny.

Royal Mail still wants to bring the CWU bureaucracy on board by threatening its privileges, withdrawing what Mandelson identified as “£20 million worth of facilities and payment for union salaries” currently allocated for union business.

Even now, in last-minute negotiations to prevent a strike, CWU deputy general secretary Dave Ward has offered Royal Mail “a three-year agreement aimed at providing long-term stability for the business, employees and our customers” providing only that changes are “*introduced by agreement,*” i.e., with themselves.

Should they go ahead, the two days of action planned for October 22 and 23 still fall short of a national strike. In an effort to limit its impact, day one allows for the processing, movement and collection of mail and day two the delivery and collection of mail. Special Delivery and Royal Mail Tracked items will still be delivered, Post Office branches will be open and Parcelforce will operate as normal.

The CWU’s role is only one manifestation of that played by the entire trade union bureaucracy in stifling opposition to the vicious programme of cuts in both the public and private sector. There is not a single trade union today that is prepared to defend even the most minimal interests of working people against the employers and the state. They are instead instruments for disciplining the workforce on behalf of the major corporations and the financial elite.

The struggle against privatization, job losses, speed-ups and the gutting of pensions requires an organizational and political break from the CWU and the formation of independent rank-and-file committees to coordinate with workers across the public sector facing similar attacks.

Above all, the working class faces a political struggle against the Labour government, the Conservative opposition, and the financial aristocracy, which are seeking to impose the full cost of the failure of the capitalist profit system onto working people.

The pro-business role of the CWU and its ilk is exemplified by their continued efforts to politically subordinate the working class to the Labour Party. After 12 years in office, the vast majority of working people correctly view Labour as a right-wing pro-corporate party no different in principle to the Conservatives.

Such is the level of opposition to Labour that the CWU was recently forced to organise a “consultative ballot” of London members on whether to continue funding the party, which returned a 96 percent vote against. This has been ignored, while the CWU continues to boost the support of just 64 Labour MPs for “third party mediation” as proof that the party is still the friend of the worker.

Workers must break once and for all with Labour and build a new party that speaks for the class interests of working people.

Capitalism is bankrupt and cannot be reformed. Economic and social life must be reorganized along socialist lines, so that the wealth produced by workers can be used to meet essential social needs for decent jobs and pay, health care, education and pensions, not to bail out the speculators and the super-rich and fund Britain’s war machine. We call on all who agree with this perspective to join the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact