

British postal workers launch two-day national strike

Chris Marsden
23 October 2009

Britain's postal workers began two days of strike action yesterday, the first major national strike since 2007. Some 120,000 workers are involved.

Yesterday, 42,000 Royal Mail sorting office staff and drivers took action at 30 key mail offices. Today, the stoppage involves 78,000 delivery and collection workers. The Communication Workers Union (CWU) is planning further strikes over a three-day period beginning October 29.

The strike takes place firstly because of the determination of postal workers to resist further job cuts and speedup in preparation for the Labour government's planned partial privatisation of letters delivery. The latest attacks come after years of cuts, speedups and privatizations of much of the postal service. In the past five years, 63,000 jobs have been eliminated under an ongoing "modernization" program that the CWU signed up to in order to end the last national strike.

There is open discussion that the postal strike could herald a fresh "winter of discontent" centering on the public sector. There are strikes already taking place by South Yorkshire firefighters and Leeds refuse workers, as well as workers at several bus and rail companies and a number of colleges and universities.

While the union called the strike under intense pressure from the workers, Royal Mail management and the Labour government actively provoked it.

The CWU was involved in hours of negotiations to avert the action, but its efforts were blocked by management, working in tandem with Labour's business secretary, Lord Peter Mandelson. CWU General Secretary Billy Hayes wrote in the *Daily Mirror* that the CWU had offered a three-year deal to guarantee "stability" in return for Royal Mail agreeing to go to the conciliation service ACAS, bringing in independent experts to determine

"what constitutes a fair day's work," and the government promising to resolve the deficit in the pension fund. The CWU's pleas were rejected.

Royal Mail and the government hope to make an example of post workers. Their aim is to intimidate and discipline millions of workers throughout the public sector. Spending cuts of £100 billion and rising are to be implemented in order to offset the ballooning state deficit.

Through these means they hope to convince the financial elite that Labour is still the party on which it can rely to do its bidding.

Only this political imperative explains the insistence that the Royal Mail must face cuts. The media has been filled with statements that the company cannot compete. These claims have all been exposed as lies. Royal Mail posted profits of £321 million for last year, double the previous financial year.

The political character of the dispute is underscored by comparing the sums involved at Royal Mail with the billions given over to Britain's failed banks, many of which are now effectively nationalized. There is no talk of the need for greater discipline and rationalization in regard to multi-millionaire bankers.

The UK bank bailout raised the public sector deficit from 3 to 13 percent of gross domestic product, according to an "Alternative Report on UK Banking Reform" produced by Manchester University's Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change. The report estimates that the net fiscal contribution of the financial sector over five years was £203 billion. This compares with the International Monetary Fund's estimate of upwards of £1,183 billion as the cost of the bailout, including £289 billion in "direct up-front financing" by the taxpayer and the total potential cost of guarantees, etc.

It is not merely that the bank bosses and speculators are treated in stark contrast to workers at Royal Mail. Rather, the attacks on jobs, wages and conditions are being

carried out to make workers pay for the economic and social sabotage perpetrated by the super-rich.

In a provocative move, Royal Mail announced that it would recruit 30,000 temporary workers as a strike-breaking force. Royal Mail's managing director, Mark Higson, wrote to managerial staff telling them they will need to dedicate two days of each work week to "operational" duties. There are 5,000 managers and 20,000 non-union workers who are expected to work throughout the strike.

Mandelson publicly allied himself with Royal Mail, denouncing the strike as "self-defeating" and refusing to condemn the hiring of strike-breakers. He blamed, in particular, London-based CWU branches as constituting "a hardcore group of those who simply don't accept what has been negotiated nationally on their behalf." The CWU London area recently voted to end funding of the Labour Party.

CWU General Secretary Hayes stated, "What we have seen in the last few days is a deliberate choreograph that tells us that the government and the Royal Mail are working hand in hand to avert any chances of reaching a solution." Dave Ward, the CWU's deputy leader, commented, "Every time we seem to make progress it appears to us that external forces come into play."

The media has also joined in the demands for the strike to be defeated. Leading up to the strike, newspapers featured baseless reports of a threat of violence by pickets gathered from feeds by the Association of Chief Police Officers. The pro-Labour Party *Daily Mirror* wrote, "Police were yesterday warned to prepare for violence as this week's postal strike threatens to turn into all-out war."

Murdoch's the *Sun* reported, "There are fears that riots could break out when the Royal Mail brings in 30,000 temporary workers to handle post."

Conservative Party leader David Cameron joined the chorus, attacking Prime Minister Gordon Brown for "an appalling display of weakness" and declaring that it required "leadership, some backbone and some courage" to combat union militancy. Shadow Business Secretary Kenneth Clarke said yesterday that he has held "private, confidential meetings" with private companies that are potential bidders for the Royal Mail.

In reality, Labour's approach differs from the Tories only in vague appeals for the dispute to go to ACAS. Brown has pledged to take a tougher line against "vested interests" blocking public sector "reform," including post

office workers. Labour's main pre-election manifesto statement even promises to give consumers legal right of redress if they are unhappy with public sector provision, including access to private providers. The private company TNT is using the strike to seek government permission to take on last-mile postal delivery.

The government's support for Royal Mail has created a crisis for the trade union bureaucracy and its efforts to subordinate the working class to a party that so openly functions as an instrument of big business. The leadership of the CWU and other unions has responded by portraying a call by a hundred or so Labour backbenchers for ACAS to intervene as proof that the party still speaks for workers. This only demonstrates that the trade union bureaucracy is every bit as right-wing and anti-working class as its political counterparts.

A letter circulated by the self-declared "centre-left" Compass group makes explicit the nature of these calls. After chastising Royal Mail management for thinking "they can 'win' by defeating the moral voice of the workers," the letter goes on to proclaim, "If the union thinks it can carry on regardless in the face of new pressures and technology, then they equally consign themselves to the history books."

It describes ACAS's mission as bringing in "sympathetic advisers" to draw up recommendations that will reconcile "the needs of the public, *the demands on the management* and the interests of Royal Mail workers." [Emphasis added].

This call for an alternative means of imposing the attacks, berating the CWU in the process, was signed by several Labour MPs, including Jon Cruddas and Kate Hoey, as well as the octogenarian doyen of the party's nominal "left," Tony Benn. It is also endorsed by UNISON General Secretary Dave Prentis, the deputy general secretary of the PCS civil service union, Hugh Lanning, and Keith Norman, general secretary of the train drivers' union Aslef.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact