Britain: Postal strikers speak to SEP campaign teams

Our reporters
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Postal workers yesterday staged their second of two 24-hour strikes, the first major national strike since 2007. On Thursday, 42,000 Royal Mail sorting office staff and drivers took action at 30 key mail offices. Friday saw 78,000 delivery and collection workers go out. The Communication Workers Union (CWU) is planning further strikes over a three-day period beginning October 29.

At depots up and down the country, Socialist Equality Party campaign teams distributed the statement, "Postal workers face a political struggle against Labour government."

As part of an extensive strike-breaking operation carried out by Royal Mail and the Labour government, news has broken of major depots manned by scab labour opening up in different parts of the country and threats to use military planes to transport mail. Utilising claims of ensuring British Army forces' Christmas mail arrives in Afghanistan, their deployment is being considered more broadly if the strikes continue.

In an atmosphere of increasing threats and intimidation, workers expressed widespread hatred for the Labour government's strike-breaking operation and stated that they were being made to pay for the bailout of the banks. At every depot visited, they listed back-breaking productivity drives imposed by Royal Mail.

At one Northampton delivery office, workers explained how Royal Mail had reduced the number of delivery workers per sector from 34 to 30 and now want it reduced to 25 delivering the same quantity mail and more. At Mount Pleasant in London workers described how the Communication Workers Union (CWU) had collaborated with such speed-ups and job cuts.

The SEP team spoke to pickets Ken, Wesley and Mark at the Dorset Mail Centre. "We are not happy with the changes management has implemented," one said. "They are pushing us to meet work targets, which are not possible. They make threats if we don't make targets."

Mark said, "If we go over one minute of our tea breaks they consider it as a breach of conduct and issue warnings. On some occasions they take disciplinary action. We have lost nearly 25 percent of staff during the last three years. But we have got so many managers who are untouched. It's always postmen and women."

Ken said, "We do not have any faith in the Labour government. They are putting money in to bail out the banks, but they do not want to settle our problems. Why should we support Labour?"

At Bearwood Royal Mail Delivery office, despite management threats against campaigners, workers took dozens of leaflets and distributed them amongst their colleagues. A postman at the office said, "Our state pension and all our working conditions are under threat."

Another said, "Our working conditions are terrible. I started at 10:30 in the morning. I finished delivering letters at 5 p.m. It's a crippling job. We will get back trouble and die early if we continue to work with big workloads like this. This is ridiculous. I am not a CWU member, but I support the strike action."

A postman of Alder Road Delivery Office in Bournemouth said, "I used to like this job, but I now hate it. I have worked for 23 years in Royal Mail. During the last few years our conditions have become terrible. We are forced to work unpaid overtime because they are giving us unachievable targets. Some postmen and women who are supposed to start at six in the morning sometimes start at 5-5:30 a.m. to avoid bullying and reprisals. Some finish late, though they do not get any overtime pay.

"I do not have any trust in the unions. They are

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responsible for the conditions we face today. But I am in favour of the strike. We must find a way out of these problems. I will read your leaflet and visit your web site."

Another postal worker explained, "We have to fight against these terrible conditions. The government is spending trillions of pounds to bail out the banks and they cut down public funding. They are going to sell Royal Mail, but they still do not have a good buyer."

A post-woman in Bournemouth Delivery Office, Wellington Road, said, "The media is attacking us, saying we just fight for money, but we are fighting to get rid of the very bad working conditions we face."

Some 1,000 workers are employed at Manchester's main Royal Mail sorting centre, on Oldham Road in the city centre.

One worker said, "In the 20 years I have worked for Royal Mail I have seen a lot of changes. I think it has gone from being a good service to a snail mail service. We've gone backwards.

"We are treated like slaves in here by management. The thing is they don't want you on a full–time contract. They want you to work when they want you to. I think there are too many managers and not enough workers. In the area I work there are 40 of us and six managers working over us.

"The workload is heavy. It involves double and treble handling. I do five days a week and work 40 hours.

"I think they want to crush us. They don't want unions any more. They want a situation where they can say, 'You come in when we want you,' so they can say, 'Oh we don't need you now. Go home and we'll call you when we need you. We don't need you now. You've got a four-week contract. Bye.'

"There's kids growing up now and leaving school who have no chance of a job. There's a lost generation there. Some of them are coming up to 25 and they've had no job. Get them in work.

"I think if we get crushed this time, we'll walk back in there and they'll rip our contracts up. We've got politicians who have raped this country, taking our money. Then they've bailed out the banks with it.

"Look at the state of the pension fund. I'm bitter about it. When I first started at Royal Mail, the pension here was a superb scheme. And then they took a big pension holiday for years. And the last 15 years it has turned into a nightmare. We've lost thousands out of that and we'll never get that money back."

Another worker said that over the past few years a series of sorting office depots had closed in the northwest area, with much of the mail sorting being transferred to Manchester: "The depots which have closed are Oldham, Stockport and Bolton in February. All the mail Stockport used to do is now here. All the mail for Chinley and places like that is here. There is so much mail here that they fail to clear it every night.

"They say we have lost 10 percent of mail volume but we've also lost 40,000 workers. So there's still more work because you've got less people to do it."

Two drivers working for Manpower Agency are refusing to cross the Warrington Post Office drivers' picket lines. They are part of a group of 20-plus agency drivers based at the North West Distribution Centre outside the Cheshire town who are backing the strike.

The men, who are members of the UNITE union, said the Royal Mail letters delivery business is too big for a single company to come in and take it over. "The aim of the government is to sell it off in nice neat manageable sections, but to do this they need to break the union."

One of the pickets at Warrington, Frank, said, "We are fighting for national and local agreements that they are trying to take away from us. They want to push us into a job we have never done before. If they get away with that, god knows what will happen. I think [Labour's Business Secretary Lord] Mandelson is taking this personally. Because he didn't get us privatised he is out to destroy the union.

"If we get beat now we won't be able to fight the Tories. We can't believe what the Labour Party is doing to us. I haven't voted for them in the last two elections and never will again. It wasn't us that caused the banking crisis. The people who did are still out there getting their high wages and bonuses.

"We have been on strike nine single days. The feeling is that this was a waste. It should have been an all-out strike. The ballot should have gone out in July. A lot of the lads believe the union hasn't led us properly on this."

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