

No compromise possible in UK post strike

A political and industrial offensive against Labour government is required

Socialist Equality Party (UK)
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Striking postal workers in Britain are involved in a fundamental political struggle, against not just Royal Mail but also the Labour government.

As national strike action continues, the various measures advanced as a means of forcing Royal Mail and the government to back down by the Communication Workers Union (CWU) have failed.

The central role in attempting to get the strike off the agenda is being played by the Trades Union Congress (TUC). Royal Mail refused to enter discussions with the arbitration body ACAS unless all planned strike action was called off beforehand. The TUC immediately offered its services as an alternative mediator in talks presided over by its general secretary, Brendan Barber.

Despite the best efforts of the TUC and CWU to reach a deal with Royal Mail, the company maintained its position that strike action must first be halted and offered no significant concession in plans that the CWU estimates will mean up to 45,000 job losses.

The TUC earned the praise of Royal Mail because of its attempt to impose surrender by postal workers just as it did when it made the deal that ended the 2007 national post strike. Far from being intransigent, the CWU said it remained “available for talks and hopes to reach an agreement as soon as possible.” Secret talks between the two parties began again immediately on Thursday.

While the union bureaucracy hopes for compromise, Royal Mail is mobilising every resource possible in order to win the dispute and crush the workforce. It claims to have already deployed 8,000 of an eventual 30,000-strong strikebreaking force of temporary agency workers to work in five “super” mail depots. Other such depots are planned. Royal Mail claims that this scab workforce, employed on the minimum wage, has sorted millions of items of mail. Although these claims will certainly be

exaggerated, the ongoing recruitment of scabs equates to replacing a quarter of the 120,000 members of the CWU and the establishing of the “super” mail centres is a strikebreaking operation the likes of which have not been seen since the 1984-1985 miners’ strike.

Royal Mail has also enlisted 5,000 managers to participate in the scabbing operation.

This is a development from which there can be no return to business as usual. Yet, it has been met with no significant opposition from either the CWU or any other union. Dave Ward, CWU deputy general secretary, said the recruitment of strikebreakers was “not a sticking point, but it is an issue.”

The union’s only response has been to threaten legal action against Royal Mail, and even this has not been carried out. The CWU said Thursday, one week after the strike action began, that it was “close to making a decision” on whether to seek an injunction over the use of scabs.

The most elemental principle of trade unionism—not crossing a picket line—is now regarded by the union tops as a minor detail. This is testimony to the rottenness of the trade union organisations, which now function as barely disguised appendages of management. It was only in 1987 that the Union of Communication Workers, predecessor of the CWU, was among those unions who demanded the expulsion of the electricians’ union, the EETPU, from the TUC for organising scabbing and signing single union no-strike deals.

Today, the Unite trade union refuses to call out or discipline its members—many of whom are in postal management—for crossing picket lines. Instead, it has issued a letter to agency workers in which it politely points out that it has an agreement with the Manpower agency in which “clause 4.2 clearly states that

‘Manpower have a policy of not asking workers to cross a picket line’.”

Gordon Lean, the Unite representative for Manpower, concludes, “I hope this clarifies the situation and leaves you in an informed position to *decide your own action* during the forthcoming Postal Workers strike” (emphasis added).

The Labour government is a full partner in this strikebreaking operation.

Labour’s immediate aim is to ensure that its plans to sell off a 30 percent stake in Royal Mail can go ahead. To do so, the government requires the establishment of a defeated and part-time workforce employed under the most draconian working conditions. The *Financial Times* has cited “several prerequisites” that private firms are to insist on in any sell-off. These include breaking up Royal Mail, with the unprofitable parts to be discarded, and for “the government to separate Royal Mail from its pension fund, which is struggling with a deficit likely to reach £10bn, and the uneconomic network of post office branches, which generate yearly losses of £90m-£100m.”

The *Financial Times* also stated, “Potential bidders are set to demand stiff conditions, including a government indemnity from strikes, in return for the future privatisation of Royal Mail.” In other words, the strikebreaking now being organised with tacit government support will in the future assume the form of a contractual obligation.

More broadly, the government must be seen to defeat the postal workers if it is to convince its big business backers that it can be relied on to impose more than £100 billion in cuts throughout the public sector and austerity measures on the entire working class.

Last week’s *Sunday Times* was headlined “Brown faces winter of discontent” and cited union leaders warning of “further disruptive strikes in the pipeline.” It noted that whereas “Ministers are consoling themselves that the recession has not triggered demonstrations on the streets by people out of work,” they also fear that “threatened strikes will add to the impression among voters that the government has lost control of the economy.”

The *Guardian* also commented, “The winter of discontent is now,” with industrial unrest fuelled by “an atmosphere of resentment at government policy that fattens bankers on taxpayer money, a loss of confidence in the prime minister, a growing public appetite for a radical change of direction...”

The hostility of the trade unions to the essential interests of the working class finds its ultimate political expression

in the refusal to wage any struggle against the Labour government. A recent consultative ballot amongst London members of the CWU voted overwhelmingly—with 96 percent in favour—for the union to end its political subsidy to the Labour Party. Yet, the union is still handing over more than £1 million a year to a government that shares responsibility with it for 60,000 job losses in the post in the past five years.

Postal workers face two interrelated tasks in order to prosecute a successful fight against Royal Mail.

Firstly, no struggle can be successful in defeating Royal Mail’s plans under the leadership of the official trade unions. That requires the building of new organisations of the rank-and-file. The task of such bodies would not be to pressure the existing leadership of the unions or to reform these organisations, but to function as the nucleus of new organs of the class struggle.

Secondly, postal workers face the necessity of a complete organisational and political break from the Labour Party. A new political party must be built, based on a socialist programme.

Labour’s every action is dictated by the major corporations, banks and the super-rich, for whom it speaks. With British and world capitalism on the brink of a second wave of recession, the ruling elite is intent on clawing back the billions upon billions of taxpayers’ money already handed over to the bankers and the billions more they will demand in future—at the cost of the decimation of vital social services, job losses, wage cuts, and ever more brutal levels of exploitation.

Workers cannot afford to pay for a crisis that is not of their making. Capitalism has failed. Economic and social life must be reorganised to meet essential social needs. Working people need decent jobs and pay, health care, education and pensions. But this means taking back the assets of society that have been stolen by the speculators and the bosses to enrich themselves and to fuel Britain’s imperialist wars, placing them at the service of the vast majority.

We call on all who agree with this perspective to join the Socialist Equality Party.



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