

Royal Mail strike: Britain's Socialist Party defends union capitulation

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21 November 2009

The Socialist Party has mounted a vociferous defence of the sellout of the national postal strike by the Communication Workers Union. Its response appeared five days after the CWU's postal executive voted to call off the action until at least the New Year based on an interim agreement.

"Postal Workers Force Management Back," the headline of the Socialist Party's "What We Think" column declares. The article employs arguments in defence the trade union bureaucracy among the most shameful made by any organisation claiming to be socialist. Its aim is to counteract rank-and-file opposition by postal workers to the CWU sellout.

"The postal strike interim agreement between the Communication Workers Union (CWU) and the Royal Mail contains a number of concessions forced out of the bosses," it begins. "These are a result of the national strike action taken over the five days and before that hundreds of local strikes."

The sellout unleashed a wave of anger in depots up and down the country, with several post workers resigning from the CWU the next day. The SP is forced to acknowledge this.

It writes, "The news broke on the Thursday evening, just hours before the third wave of the national strikes were due to take place. There was anger amongst many postal workers who were preparing to go to the picket lines on the Friday and the following Monday. There was also confusion because they couldn't understand why the leadership called the strike off when it was clear that the bosses were stunned by the level of support the strike had gained, including from a majority in the opinion polls.

"Many workers wondered what could be in the agreement that warranted the strike being postponed.

"TUC Secretary Brendan Barber said on the steps of Congress House that the 'interim' deal guaranteed a period of calm up to Christmas. This added to the general bewilderment of all those who were thinking that the strike had been called off just at a time when postal workers had never been stronger."

The Socialist Party does not make a word of criticism about the CWU's acceptance of a no-strike agreement. Instead, its article asserts, in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, that opposition to the deal was founded upon a misunderstanding that was quickly resolved once its supposedly

magnificent achievements had been made known.

"But once they had a chance of looking at what was achieved by their mass strike action," the SP writes, "many of the workers have drawn the conclusion that the deal (unanimously agreed, it seems, by the elected postal executive committee) does allow the CWU to regain some element of trade union control in the workplace and therefore does push back the attacks of the bosses."

As to proof of this supposed rethink, the SP can offer none. Instead, it cites the comments of a single local union bureaucrat: "One local CWU leader in the South West wrote to his members, 'We have forced a vicious employer back to the table.' He went on to say, 'We know the interim deal does not settle every single problem in the industry, but it gives us a foothold ... Royal Mail set out to destroy your union. We are still here.'"

The article continues by asserting, "The idea, often put forward in the right-wing media, that workers are ready to strike at the drop of a hat is wrong. In this case many think the interim deal opens the way to the reversal of the attacks on them and their union."

This statement simply adds insult to injury. Postal workers did not strike "at the drop of a hat," but in the face of attacks on their wages and working conditions and the threat of an additional 35,000 job losses. It developed as the outcome of sustained pressure by the rank and file on a union that has signed up to the management agenda of increased competitiveness at their expense, after it sold out a previous national strike and endorsed the 2007 Pay and Modernisation Agreement.

After months of management-imposed unpaid overtime, increased workloads and disciplinary procedures against those who do not comply, local strikes broke out across the country. The current national dispute was preceded by 15 weeks of rolling stoppages, during which CWU Assistant General Secretary Dave Ward offered Royal Mail a no-strike agreement and opposed holding a national ballot until the union was deluged by requests from some 500 branches.

The strikes were called off right at the point in which all 120,000 CWU members were to walk out together for the first time. The result is a massive setback for postal workers.

The SP in passing notes that “London workers and some other areas have lost 18 days in strike action, a loss of around £2,000 per worker.” The sellout renders this sacrifice null.

The strikes built up a massive backlog of mail in the run-up to Christmas, the peak trading period. Postal workers have now been forced into a position where they must clear this backlog, alongside many thousands of casuals recruited during the dispute as a strike-breaking force. The Socialist Party knows this very well. Noting that the interim deal allows for a “review of progress every two week” and “Postal workers... will expect their leaders to reinstate the strike if it is clear that Royal Mail are deliberately dragging things out until they have got Christmas out of the way.”

The SP continues, “The job of leadership is to know when to advance and when to retreat. In the postal workers’ case it was clear that it was the bosses who were in retreat. But also what has to be taken into account is the readiness of your own troops to continue to advance as well. Many postal workers were looking to Christmas as time to be with their families and to have a well earned rest.”

If knowing when to retreat is the mark of leadership, then the working class is truly blessed with the best leaders imaginable! Retreat is second nature to the union bureaucracy, as apologetics is to the Socialist Party.

Any worker who has taken up a struggle in his workplace will be familiar with this sort of rhetoric, the text book response of a trade union bureaucrat to legitimise swinish behaviour. First of all, try and overcome any opposition to a sellout by claiming that “under the circumstances it was the best possible deal,” and then blame the working class for a lack of willingness to fight.

Of particular significance in estimating why the SP is such an enthusiast for the interim agreement is the passage stating that “Workloads and other working conditions will once more be subject to negotiation rather than be imposed on the workers with the union shut out of the process. In a number of places in the wording of the interim agreement the words mutuality or mutual agreement are used. This suggests that the union in the final agreement will, if not have a veto, at least be part of the process of any future changes, which themselves will be subject to agreement before they take place.”

“This issue of trade union ‘control’ is important,” the SP continues. “It lies at the heart of the battle in the postal workplace. It means the difference between the workers having some form of protection against a bullying management and none at all.”

Stripped of its lies and half-truths, the SP is arguing that the agreement is worthwhile because it guarantees the future collaborative relationship between the CWU and Royal Mail management in the “process of any future change”—that is, it defends the corporatist company union role that has been played for years by the CWU in policing its members and imposing management dictates.

Is the Socialist Party referring to the same CWU that has collaborated with a pay freeze, 53,000 jobs cuts in the last seven years and the raising of the retirement age to 65? The CWU has not protected its members in the past and will not do so in future: Quite the reverse. Assistant General Secretary Dave Ward said of the interim agreement, “We can now have a period of calm where we hope we can genuinely take forward modernisation in a way that puts the union at the centre.”

“Modernisation” is the code-word used by Royal Mail and the Labour government for its plans to impose sweeping cuts and productivity hikes in preparation for the partial privatisation of the service. The only enforceable aspect of the interim agreement is the CWU’s commitment to a no-strike agreement at national or local level.

There is no withdrawal of the changes in working practices that have been unilaterally imposed, or of the disciplinary action against those who have resisted until now. These are merely subject to negotiation. CWU branch officials are in fact reporting a refusal by Royal Mail management to withdraw executive changes in work practices or past disciplinary actions and the fact that they are continuing to target militants for suspension and not paying any worker who fails to complete his or her workload on time.

Royal Mail management has agreed to reinstate the facility time for union reps precisely because the CWU has undertaken to implement management demands. To help in this task, the CWU is seeking to free itself from any residual control by its members.

The *Guardian* reported on October 20 that Ward had told its reporters that “because officials have to be elected every year, they are in ‘perpetual election mode’ and therefore constantly feel the need to talk tough to appeal to the CWU’s rank and file. He said the union was prepared to hold elections less frequently to improve relations with management.”

The Socialist Party reported this comment in a previous article as “unfortunate.” It writes in this way because, like similar petty-bourgeois groups, such as the Socialist Workers Party, it has been integrated at all levels into the structures of the trade union bureaucracy and shares the same social interests as the rest of this privileged stratum. The Socialist Party has two leading members on the Telecoms section of the CWU national executive, Gary Jones and Bernard Roome. Not a word has been heard from either of them during the entire postal dispute.



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