

Britain: Communication Workers Union sabotages postal strike

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All strikes by Britain's 120,000 postal workers were called off until at least the New Year, on the evening that two days of action were about to begin. The action is a betrayal orchestrated by the Communication Workers Union and their allies in the Trades Union Congress.

The initial announcement came after a further round of talks between the CWU and Royal Mail management, brokered by the TUC. Initial statements by TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber indicated that the strikes had been called off, and a moratorium on further action accepted. This is even though no agreement has been reached on the package of job cuts and speedups being planned, in preparation for the partial privatisation of the letters delivery service.

Barber said the decision had been made to provide "a period of calm," in which the two sides could reach a long-term deal and ensure that Royal Mail deliveries would be "free of any disruption" over Christmas. Securing a final deal, he added, remained a long way away.

Up to 45,000 jobs are now immediately under threat at Royal Mail, together with pay cuts and a back-breaking increase in productivity. These attacks were from the start barely opposed by the CWU, which continually declared its commitment to "modernisation" before and during the strike and accepted that redundancies must be made. "Modernisation" is the standard euphemism employed by Royal Mail and the Labour government for the sweeping programme of cuts and speed-ups designed to prepare for privatisation.

Having been finally forced to call a strike by a militant rank-and-file, the union bureaucracy has consistently worked to limit its impact, calling out different sections of the work force on different days.

CWU members took five 24-hour strikes over the past two weeks, all of which involved different sections striking separately. Significantly, the strikes the CWU rushed to call off would have been the first to involve all 120,000 union members.

While hamstringing the strikes, the CWU bureaucrats spent virtually their every waking moment seeking a rotten deal with management. They did so even as management hired a scab workforce of 30,000 temps and assigned management personnel to break the strike, in collusion with the Brown government and Business Secretary Lord Mandelson. The CWU never opposed this scabbing through the organisation of mass pickets. It has now confirmed that it is not even pressing ahead with a legal challenge that was due to be held in the High Court yesterday, the day of the planned strike.

In contrast, on the day the CWU agreed to end all action, Royal Mail took out full-page advertisements in national newspapers, urging CWU members to cross picket lines and return to work. Leaflets were distributed at all depots describing the strike as "barmy."

The CWU also left unresolved the issue of Royal Mail's £10 billion pension fund deficit—the product of repeated "pension holidays" taken by the company with the support of the Labour government.

To negotiate under these conditions could have only one aim: to end the strike on Royal Mail's terms. The CWU's only real concern is to keep what amounts to an in-house franchise as Royal Mail's enforcer of attacks against the work force. Thus CWU Deputy General Secretary Dave Ward proudly declared that the decision to end the strike had been unanimously agreed by its executive board, so that, "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.”

“It will take exceptional efforts to rebuild trust, but we will work very hard to ensure that the agreement stays on track,” he added.

For its part, Royal Mail Managing Director Mark Higson spoke of seeking “a sensible agreement with the CWU” and “positive and constructive discussions on the next stage of Royal Mail’s modernisation plan.” Mandelson gloated that the task was now to agree “the next phase of modernisation.” He thanked Barber personally for brokering the sell-out, adding that he hoped that “wrinkles in the modernisation process...will be smoothed out by discussion and negotiation without resorting to further strikes in the future.”

On Friday, in a fresh twist, it was announced that some details of the “interim” agreement ending the strikes would be released. Such details were thin and contradictory. The CWU said that “significant concessions” were made by Royal Mail, but the company stated that the agreement’s key issues were the same as that discussed last month.

The CWU’s actions serve to confirm the repeated warnings made by the Socialist Equality Party. The trade unions and the well-fed careerists at their head function as a second arm of management to discipline and control their members and sabotage any and all struggles by their members that they cannot suppress. This is especially the case when the entire trade union bureaucracy is aware of a mounting wave of unrest that is widely acknowledged as threatening an outbreak of industrial unrest similar to the 1979 “Winter of Discontent” that helped bring down the Labour Government of James Callaghan.

The union bureaucracy will stop at nothing to prevent such an occurrence. The initial stirrings of opposition in the working class have occasioned rank treachery. Preceding the CWU’s sell-out of its members by just one day, the Fire Brigades Union called off another important industrial struggle in Britain: the strike by firefighters in South Yorkshire. It did so just two hours before a strike was to begin, and in talks to which it invited management to attend.

The trade union bureaucracy, like its political allies in government, is charged by the financial oligarchy with extracting the hundreds of billions in bailout funds given to banks and major corporations from the workers—through a devastating programme of cuts in

jobs, wages, and conditions, as well as the elimination of vital social services. The fate of the postal strike is a pledge by the bureaucracy that it will do whatever is demanded of it when confronting action by any section of workers.

Workers must draw their own political conclusions.

No struggle can be waged successfully against any of the attacks now being waged against working people under the leadership and through the structures of the trade unions. The CWU and its counterparts no longer function as trade unions as they have been historically understood, as organisations for the collective defence of the jobs and working conditions of their members. They are, rather, instruments for the collective imposition of the dictates of management and the government.

New organisations of the rank-and-file must be built now in order to pursue the class struggle, in a rebellion against the trade unions.

Moreover, the working class must make its final organisational and political break with the Labour Party, which is a right-wing party of big business no different in essence from the Conservatives.

A new and genuinely socialist party is required, taking as its point of departure a refusal to accept that working people must pay for the crisis of the profit system, and setting out to reorganise economic and social life to meet essential social needs. That party is the Socialist Equality Party.



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