

British postal union seeks to deliver management's agenda

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Since calling off the national strike last November, the Communication Workers Union (CWU) has been locked in secret talks with Royal Mail (RM) over the fate of the jobs and conditions of the union's 120,000 members. Deputy General Secretary Dave Ward claimed to have secured a climb-down by management. Instead, the CWU is continuing to act as a junior partner of management in carrying out the business objectives of RM.

The CWU's enforcement of a no-strike deal has tied the postal workers' hands while management has pressed ahead with further attacks at the local level. Even the vague terms of the Interim Agreement on the basis of which the CWU called a cessation of strike action have been broken by executive action, under which management unilaterally overturns terms and conditions. In London, there been widespread reports of victimisation of postal workers who have not met performance demands set by management.

During the recent heavy snowfall, CWU headquarters received many calls from members who were told by management that, because they could not complete their shifts due to unsafe conditions, they would have to take paid leave or unpaid overtime at a future date.

In order to suppress opposition when the national strike was called off, the CWU gave assurances that the strike ballot remained "active." But the call by the CWU London District to have the Postal Executive Committee reinstate the strike has been rejected on the grounds that local disputes will be resolved within the framework of the final deal ultimately arrived at through negotiations. The London District originally supported the executive calling off the strike and was forced to change its position in the face of rank-and-file opposition.

A virtual blackout has been imposed on the closed-

door discussions between the CWU and RM. However, Royal Mail's position remains unchanged on all the main grievances that gave rise to last year's dispute, while the CWU is seeking to accommodate itself to management's agenda. This is made clear in the December/January briefing posted by CWU Postal Executive member Pete Keenlyside on the CWU web site. It lists a catalogue of concessions that Royal Mail demands the CWU impose on its members.

Royal Mail remains committed to wholesale job losses. The only proviso the CWU has raised is a clause banning compulsory redundancies. This is a cover behind which the union has presented proposals for how the bulk of the job losses can be achieved. In the first half of 2009 alone, 5,000 jobs were axed. The report states, "Royal Mail have stated previously that they are looking for a ratio of around 75 percent full-time to 25 percent part-time, and we need to tie them down to this."

It adds that Royal Mail is demanding the union sign up to a rationalisation plan that would include closures of regional distribution centres and the possible closure of up to half of all mail centres. Royal Mail has also refused to end its pay freeze. In response, the CWU has offered to make any pay increase self-financing by including productivity strings and changes to the wage bill in a three-year deal.

While the official policy of the CWU is for a 35-hour-week gross with no loss of pay, it is preparing the ground for this to incorporate unpaid meal relief, so that it dovetails with RM's downsizing agenda.

"Management have produced costings to show that even a 35-hour net week, involving unpaid meal reliefs, would be too expensive for them, but we are challenging their figures," Keenlyside writes. "Part of the problem in discussing any benefits package is that

management have yet to commit to telling us what would be on offer if we were to accept all of their proposals, which makes negotiating a bit difficult.”

The CWU accepts management’s claim that its demands are about “modernisation.” This is the euphemism used by RM to justify the application of technology for the sole purpose of maximising profits at the expense of jobs and conditions.

Having helped implement all the other attacks associated with the 2007 Pay and Modernisation Agreement, the CWU is now being tasked with overcoming opposition within the work force to the automation of major parts of the service through the introduction of equipment such as Walk Sequencing Machines and Intelligent Letter Sorting Machines.

Royal Mail has made no bones about the fact that its main objective is to utilise this technology to reduce the number of full-time staff and facilitate greater productivity through measures such as increased delivery spans.

The CWU’s overriding concern is to ensure its position as an adjunct of management in policing the work force.

A blog published under the alias Roy Mayall notes, “Some of my younger colleagues even suggest that management and union are all part of the same system.” It adds, “Sometimes in my cynical moments I’m inclined to think that the only real thing that anyone has got out of these strikes is that the union has cemented its place in the work place. The pain will continue, but at least the union will negotiate what kind of pain it will be. Or, to put it another way: Imagine the two sides had been negotiating the death penalty. Our side comes out declaring victory. ‘It’s alright lads, they won’t hang you anymore. It’s lethal injection from now on.’ ”

Such comments indicate a growing recognition that the CWU functions as an arm of management, but definite political and organisational conclusions must be drawn. Any fight against RM and its backers in the Labour government that is made dependent upon the CWU will only lead to defeat. The central thrust of the position of the fake left groups, such as the Socialist Workers Party and the Socialist Party, is to block workers from drawing the necessary conclusions and keep them tied to the union apparatus. Both are directly implicated in the betrayal of the postal workers.

The Socialist Party has two members on the CWU executive in the telecoms section. It claimed that the calling off of the national strike was a victory and that the union had won major concessions from management. The Socialist Workers Party’s leading member, CWU President Jane Loftus, voted to call off the strike and shortly after resigned from the party.

Before her resignation, the Socialist Workers Party made no public criticism of Loftus, and even afterwards it stated that it looked forward to future collaboration. The Socialist Workers Party is presently focusing on popularising a series of points it proposes as the basis of an agreement negotiated by the CWU, while telling workers they can defend their jobs and conditions if they pressure the union to “get serious about fighting.”



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