

Britain: Post workers accept rotten agreement

A vote of no confidence in the Communication Workers Union

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The Communication Workers Union (CWU) has succeeded in pushing through acceptance of the “Business Transformation 2010 and Beyond” agreement, with the backing of little more than a third of the membership.

The ballot result announced on April 27 registered a majority of two to one in favour. Only 54 percent of the membership took part—a 10 percent decline in the last ballot on an agreement two years ago.

The result was more a vote of no confidence in the CWU, rather than a mandate for its agenda.

The union now officially subscribes to Royal Mail’s (RM’s) modernisation programme, based upon automation to cut costs and maximise profits in preparation for further privatisation. But in reality it has backed this pro-company policy to the hilt for months, as evidenced by its betrayal of one strike after another, including that staged last winter. As a result, postal workers have concluded that they cannot advance their interests at all through the structures of the CWU.

The Royal Mail Chat forum has a number of posts from workers who have quit the CWU in protest. “CWU = could not care less for the workers union”, said one. “13 years union membership ended today,” “cancelled mine today, bare-face lies have been told”, said others.

CWU Deputy General Secretary Dave Ward stated, “This is a strong ballot result for a strong deal and we are delighted that our members have fully supported this hard fought for agreement.” But Mark Higson, managing director of Royal Mail Letters, called it “a great outcome for Royal Mail, its customers and its people.”

Royal Mail, after organising mass strike-breaking operations last year, has restored the union bureaucracy to its semi-official position as its industrial police force.

The agreement allows for the CWU to be financially rewarded for the services it renders to the company. It states that the relationship between the CWU and RM “will be underpinned by a professional financial relationship with funding arrangements on a more consistent footing.” The CWU has even agreed to revise its internal structures to meet RM’s demands.

These are not the actions of a defensive organisation of workers, but of a yellow company union.

The consultation process in the run-up to the ballot was a travesty. Postal workers were told that even if they voted no, RM would proceed regardless. Not only did the union make it clear that it would offer no further resistance, but Ward described previous strikes as “tearing the industry apart.”

“It was obvious to everyone involved that the old ‘them and us’ mentality simply had to go,” he declared. “Industrial relations have to improve and we’re all committed to that.”

The CWU waged a marketing campaign for a yes vote under the slogan, “For a Fresh Start”. Its TV channel, CWUTV, kept up a steady stream of coverage presenting a vote in favour as a done deal. Postal workers were also sent a DVD with a message from Ward on why they should vote yes and a selective summary of the 80-page document containing highlights that were conducive to a yes vote. Meetings between postal workers and their representatives were scheduled in break times.

In order to receive the lump-sum payments and 6.9 percent pay increase over three years, postal workers were urged to turn a blind eye to the principle of “An injury to one is an injury to all.”

Postal workers in deliveries were singled out to take the brunt of RM’s attack. For them the agreement means less pay for increased work. The new terms for

delivering door-to-door abolish early shift allowance for full-timers. Payment is switched from per item to a flat rate and the cap lifted on the volumes delivered, under conditions in which RM is committed to a major expansion of this part of the business.

Part-timers, approximately 21 percent of the workforce, will not be paid for the amount of work performed but on a pro-rata basis. Speaking on CWUTV, Ward implied that only by working more for less money could full-timers expect to keep their jobs. He defended the fact that postal workers would have to work Saturdays for longer hours because of business demands.

The CWU claimed that the agreement guaranteed “job security”, based on RM pledging that it will seek to avoid compulsory redundancies in implementing job losses. Over the past eight years, 60,000 jobs have been axed through voluntary redundancies.

The CWU also downplayed the implications of its agreement to assist with the closure of mail centres, even though RM intends to close half of them. Speaking on CWUTV, Ward stated that the membership “ultimately have to face up to the fact that some of their mail centres may have to close”.

This rotten agreement could only have been put to the membership thanks to the sabotage of last year’s national strike. Postal workers were forced to return to work just prior to Christmas, when the strike would have been most effective, under the terms of an interim agreement that contained a no-strike clause. The executive voted unanimously to call off the national strike, including Jane Loftus, a leading member of the Socialist Workers Party and president of the CWU Postal Executive Committee. Loftus quit the SWP when they belatedly issued her with a mild rebuke for her betrayal.

Another member of the PEC, Pete Keenslyside, is a leading figure in the CWU’s Broad Left and a Labour Party member. Keenslyside has stated that he voted against the agreement, but made perfectly clear he was not prepared to lead any opposition.

In his February/March report on the discussion on the PEC, he stated, “When it came to the debate on the Agreement itself, the majority view was that it was not a bad deal when taken in the context of the state of the business and what was happening in the world outside.... When it goes out, members in delivery will

have to make up their own minds as to whether to accept or not. If the vote is to reject, the negotiators will have to go back to the business but there is no knowing how they would react or what else could be gained.”

The betrayal of the CWU cannot be countered simply by more invocations to militancy, or by applying pressure on the union to change course. Time and again, postal workers have come forward to oppose the attacks of RM, only to see their efforts thwarted by the CWU.

In 2007, the postal service accounted for 60 percent of all days lost through industrial action nationally. The CWU called a halt to the five-month strike movement and pushed through the Pay and Modernisation Agreement. This agreement increased the retirement age from 60 to 65, cut jobs and increased the workload of existing staff. The union accepted that flexibility and absorption could be determined by local agreement, which gave rise to a bullying and victimisation campaign by management and led to last year’s strike movement. Any movement in defence of postal workers jobs and conditions can only develop as rank-and-file rebellion against the rotten corporate body that is the CWU.



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