

Postal worker suicide in Britain reveals human cost of closures

Paul Bond
8 September 2010

An inquest in the tragic death of Robert Steele has underscored the devastating human impact of the Royal Mail closures campaign. Steele, who died in April, had become depressed about the job transfer that would follow closure of his workplace. The inquest recorded a verdict of suicide. The cause of death was hanging.

Robert Steele was a 53-year old engineer from Stoke. He worked maintaining machinery at the Royal Mail sorting office in Crewe, Cheshire. He was found dead at his home in Stoke on April 7.

Steele had suffered a history of depression. A month before his suicide he was referred to Stoke-on-Trent's mental health crisis team after he expressed symptoms of anxiety and suicidal thoughts.

He was particularly anxious about the impending closure of the Crewe sorting office, with the transfer of 600 jobs to Warrington. The Crewe office finally closed a few days before the inquest delivered its verdict, nearly 18 months after Royal Mail had announced plans for the closure. This was the second such closure and transfer Steele had faced within Royal Mail in the recent period.

His mental health nurse, Gary Watson, explained to the inquest the impact this uncertainty had had on Steele: "It was evident from having a conversation with him that the change of his employment location was having a big impact on his mental health. He did not want to move. He found it difficult trying to make decisions about whether to stay or leave".

He was hardly alone in feeling this pressure from the company. His brother-in-law, Gerald Pearson, said that the family had spoken to some of his colleagues. They had also told the family that "they don't feel supported by Royal Mail".

The anxiety over this impending closure, which would have more than doubled his journey to work,

was exacerbated because Robert Steele had recently already been through the uncertainty of a depot closure. He had previously worked in a depot in his hometown of Stoke. When that closed he had had to take the job in Crewe.

In April 2009 all but 14 of Stoke's 80 distribution jobs, and all 20 processing posts, were cut. Processing staff were offered a transfer to Wolverhampton, nearly 30 miles away. Protest walkouts by processing and distribution staff were supported by a wildcat strike among delivery workers. When the depot finally closed in September last year, all processing and distribution functions were transferred to Wolverhampton.

The transfer of jobs from Crewe to Warrington takes place amidst a national restructuring plan that threatens thousands of postal workers with displacement or job loss. Warrington will take on distribution for closed offices from across the region, including Liverpool and Crewe. This restructuring plan is the outcome of an agreement between Royal Mail and the Communication Workers Union (CWU). The CWU has played a pernicious role in downplaying the scale of closures.

The impact of the CWU's actions can be seen quite clearly in the Crewe closure.

The depot closed with postal workers still unhappy at the deal they had been offered. Royal Mail will run a shuttle bus from Crewe to Warrington, but there is no guarantee that this will remain in place in the long term. Workers were concerned at the travel costs involved in the move, and many have refused to move as a result. As with Robert Steele, some of these workers may already have undergone previous transfers and attendant rises in travel costs. Lee Mutch, from Crewe, had worked at the sorting office for 27 years. He told local press that he had been able to stay at Crewe because he had a job driving, "but there are many

others who have not been so lucky”.

The comments of the South Cheshire CWU branch secretary, Steve Wright, sum up the bankruptcy of the perspective the union has offered postal workers.

He told local press that the closure was sad, because it marked “the end of an era” in the town. All he could offer by way of response from the union was that they “want management to stick to the national agreement whereby nobody will be forced to move from Crewe until they are matched with the same job they have now”.

This “national agreement” is the one signed by the union. It has rubber-stamped Royal Mail’s closure campaign, and allowed it to proceed unchecked. The real worth of this national agreement can be gathered by Wright’s admission that “the process is far from complete. There will be people moving to Warrington today who don’t know what their job situation is”.

The agreement has been a fig leaf that has operated entirely to Royal Mail’s benefit. Wright’s comments make clear that there was no possibility of using it to defend postal workers. His silence about those workers who have taken voluntary redundancy because they are unhappy with the deal being offered is also eloquent. Public bodies are looking to such silent job losses as a convenient by-product of the uncertainty caused by restructuring.

Wright’s comments express only the contempt of the trade union bureaucracy for postal workers. The CWU can offer postal workers only the requirements of the Royal Mail. Robert Steele took his life in part because of anxiety over his job. Other workers still face uncertainty about their future. Given this, there is something deeply cynical and unpleasant about Wright’s comment that the union wants the move to Warrington to be as “painless as possible” for workers.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact