

Britain: Royal Mail casual workers protest non-payment of wages

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An unknown number of the 18,000 casual workers employed by Royal Mail over the Christmas period did not receive their pay, or were short-changed for weeks.

Royal Mail repeatedly claimed that they were dealing promptly with the problems and that it was working hard to pay wages weekly as agreed. Press releases continue to insist that the issue was limited to a handful of workers.

However, a Channel 4 report suggests the numbers affected were in the hundreds. The owner of unofficial Internet forum Royal Mail Chat estimated that more than 5,000 people had come looking for answers to the site and that it had “crashed twice because of the number of people.” A Freedom of Information request has been lodged with the Royal Mail Group Limited demanding to know the exact number of those affected.

The scandal only came to prominence after news articles began appearing in local media, describing walkouts by casual workers at various mail centres across Britain in December, including in Cornwall, the North West Midlands, Bristol and south London.

Many more vented their frustration on Royal Mail Chat. Some complained that they had only received part of their pay—sometimes, as low as one pence for a week’s work—or no pay at all. Others described how they had worked in excess of 50 hours a week, been given wrong shifts or paid at rates lower than advertised. Still more revealed how they were turned away at the gates because they did not appear on staff listings or had not received security badges.

Royal Mail managers washed their hands of any responsibility and said they should complain to Angard Staffing Solutions Limited, the agency responsible for their employment. When workers tried to contact Angard, they could not get any answers.

Even when Royal Mail eventually accepted that there

was a problem and issued vouchers, there were reports that some workers still missed out. It is reported that Royal Mail is now claiming some of the affected workers have been overpaid and owe the company!

Royal Mail’s actions had a drastic effect on the casual workers who include students, long-term unemployed and pensioners. The lack of pay caused many to incur bank overdraft charges. The unemployed who had lost their Job Seekers’ Allowance as a result of taking on the job were left without any income or unable to cover basic living costs. They could not quit, as they would then be ineligible to reapply for the allowance.

Communication Workers Union (CWU) deputy general secretary Dave Ward downplayed the situation, declaring that “there’s a small group of people who are being treated poorly by Angard and that is unacceptable.... We’re urging all agency workers at Royal Mail to join the CWU so that we can help protect their pay and conditions at work.”

The *Guardian* reported this week that many workers are pursuing their claims through employment tribunals.

Royal Mail issued a defence of Angard, claiming that its “external supplier” was facing difficulties in managing the 18,000 casuals in addition to the record number of 110,000 applications.

Angard’s external supplier is Reed Specialist Recruitment, which manages day-to-day recruitment. However, Angard is a non-trading subsidiary of Royal Mail set up in 2006. Its two current directors are Royal Mail human resources director John Duncan and Royal Mail innovations limited director Kathleen Harmeston. According to Angard’s web site, it fulfils “Royal Mail’s requirements for flexible resource by managing a ‘pool’ of employees that are supplied on

assignments, ranging from a single-shift cover to longer assignments covering a number of weeks.”

The company remained in the background until last year, when it took responsibility for recruiting most of Royal Mail’s Christmas casual workers. Reports suggest it is almost impossible to get any job nowadays with Royal Mail unless it is through Angard.

Most Angard contracts pay the minimum wage and last less than the 12 weeks. This cut-off period marries with the limit in the new European Agency Workers’ Directive, which came into law in October 2011 and stipulates that those on long-term temporary contracts should be paid the same rate as permanent workers.

The government and Royal Mail management are restructuring the business in preparation for its privatisation. This was brought another step closer last year with the passing of the Postal Services Act, in line with European Union postal service liberalisation legislation, which has led to huge increases in casualisation, part-time working, unsocial patterns of work, wage cutting and outsourcing.

The creation of Angard as a supplier of cheap casual labour is vital to this process. In postal services across the world, casualisation of labour has become normal practice. There are more casual than full-time workers in the Japan Post Service. In Dutch-owned TNT Post, the number of full-time jobs has halved, and the company rarely recruits full-time employees. In Germany, 60 percent of workers in the new postal operators are on “mini-job” contracts earning less than €400. Sweden’s Bring Citymail employs around 1,000 workers on hourly rates.

In many European countries, conditions resemble the early days of capitalism. Private mail companies drop off crates of letters and small parcels to the houses of individuals, paying them a wage just under the amount that would require them to be made permanent workers and denying them sick pay, pensions or health insurance.

The unions have played the major role in working with postal services management to impose new conditions. Many have forged partnership agreements with new operators to ensure they continue to receive union dues.

In the CWU, both Ward and Billy Hayes, who became general secretary in 2001, are portrayed as lefts. But under their stewardship, 45,000 jobs have

been slashed from Royal Mail, and its workers remain among the poorest paid in the UK. The campaign against privatisation has all but died, as Hayes indicated last year after the passing of the Postal Services Act, when he said, “The UK’s postal services face an uncertain future because of the government’s bill. Without strong guarantees the post office network could be stripped of a third of its income when Royal Mail is privatised leading to thousands of closures.”

He continued by insisting, “Regardless of who buys this business, the CWU will still be representing the interests of postal workers”—making clear that the CWU considers privatisation to be a done deal.



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