

UK postal workers at Whitstable abandoned by Communication Workers Union

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The Communication Workers Union (CWU) called off a second 24-hour strike by postal workers against the closure of the Whitstable Delivery Office in East Kent.

The strike, called for Saturday, January 26, and Monday, January 28, was set to coincide with a “day of action” organised by local residents. It was in response to Royal Mail’s plans to close the Whitstable Delivery Office in January 2013 and transfer the 50 postal workers to a larger site in Canterbury. The move has been opposed by both the postal workers and the local community.

The closure would result in residents having to make a 16-mile round trip to Canterbury to collect undelivered mail. Despite the second strike being called off, residents still assembled on the day outside the office to demonstrate their opposition.

On January 12, workers staged their first strike and marched through the town with residents. The march reportedly attracted 300 participants and met a popular response from shop owners and residents along the route. Royal Mail drafted an estimated 69 managers from other locations to provide a scab service on the day. The demonstrators blocked a Royal Mail lorry at the site’s entrance until police intervened.

Following the strike, Royal Mail announced the office would close February 11.

Postal workers were not informed of the plans to close their office along with another nearby office in Herne Bay until the autumn of 2011, after which petitions, public meetings and appeals to local politicians were conducted. Workers finally held a meeting at the end of 2012 to ballot for industrial action, which received an overwhelming majority to strike.

After the announcement of the first strike, Royal Mail

began talks with CWU officials on January 9, in which both were eager to prevent this action by workers. The CWU area rep, Jean Roberts, said the dispute was because there had been “no consultation” over the closure of the office, but she insisted that the CWU wanted no more than to talk.

Roberts claimed that Royal Mail had not kept to a national agreement made in October 2012, which requires consultation on the closure of local delivery centres. Roberts added that “the people of Whitstable don’t want this and they can’t see any reason for it.”

Dave Banbury, the regional secretary for the CWU Kent branch, made the same point, saying, “We never accepted closure of local delivery offices and we believe there’s an alternative”. He made clear that the CWU is not opposed in principle to the closure, saying there “doesn’t appear to be a strong business case for moving it to Canterbury.”

These statements are nothing more than the CWU attempting to cover for its own complicity with the closure. The proposed Herne Bay office closure, against which the same workers and residents campaigned, was carried out at the end of last year without any word from the CWU. This is also not to mention the wave of closures in the area and nationally.

Before the first strike, one Whitstable worker wrote revealingly on the Unite the Resistance web site, “There were talks with the union at the regional level about the closure of Mail Centres around the county and certain things may have been agreed, but the closure of the delivery office in Whitstable was not one of them”.

A Royal Mail spokesperson also exposed the CWU’s role in these closures, pointing out that not only had the union been consulted, but that it had agreed to the

proposals. The CWU pathetically claimed that while these talks did in fact occur, they were not a consultation but a meeting where Royal Mail told the CWU that this was going to happen.

If this was the case, it raises the question of why the CWU has not mounted any resistance. Royal Mail also added that the local delivery office closures were the second part of a two-phase restructuring. The first phase had been the closure of several sorting facilities and their concentration into a super sorting office in Medway. This led to 250 job losses, which the CWU called “regrettable but unavoidable”.

Not only is the CWU trying to mask its complicity, but has also laid the basis for winding down further opposition. After the first strike, the CWU called off the second strike when Royal Mail agreed to a three-week joint review of the closure. This is nothing more than providing the necessary rubber-stamping of the closure. Jean Roberts said, “We just want them to follow the national agreement.”

Sally Hopkins, the Royal Mail spokesperson, said the review is only “to provide clarity about the consultation that has already taken place and to provide further assurances to our employees.” The review is being overseen by the conciliation service Acas and “will look at a number of elements, including parking facilities and the arrangements for non-delivered items of mail.” She added that Royal Mail is “pleased that CWU has said that there will be no further industrial action at Whitstable whilst the review is under way.”

This proposed closure and the many others that have already taken place flow directly from the CWU’s betrayal of the postal workers’ strike in 2009 and the subsequent sellout agreement between the union and Royal Mail. It is in this agreement, called “Business Transformation 2010 and Beyond”, that the CWU agreed to closures across the country in preparation for privatising the whole service under the guise of “modernisation”.

In a Postal Executive document written early in 2009, “A Credible CWU Alternative”, the union made clear its willingness to accommodate job losses and the closure of delivery centres to this end:

“The CWU accept that the modernisation of Royal Mail is both a necessity and a priority...the CWU...recognise the need to reduce costs and increase efficiency. We know this will mean a reduction in

overall jobs, rationalisation of the Mail Centre Network and more flexible delivery spans.”

Members of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) were also present at the demonstration outside Whitstable delivery office, carrying placards calling for the defence of postal workers. The SWP has made little mention of the CWU calling off the Whitstable strike beyond mentioning it alongside the point that it took place while talks continue.

The SWP has played a more direct role in the betrayal of postal workers. Jane Loftus, a leading member of the SWP at the time, was president of the CWU Postal Executive Committee that voted unanimously to call off the 2009 strike for an interim agreement containing a no-strike clause. Angry and embarrassing questions about the union’s role in 2009 led the SWP to issue some mild criticisms of Loftus, who subsequently resigned from the party. However, CWU general secretary Billy Hayes continues to be a regular speaker at the SWP’s summer “Marxism” event.



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