

Postal union ends unofficial strike as UK government announces Royal Mail privatisation

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As Business Secretary Vince Cable was announcing plans for the privatisation of the Royal Mail, the Communication Workers Union (CWU) sought to shut down an unofficial strike action by postal workers in Peterborough.

The dispute began on Friday July 5, when around 200 staff walked out of the Papyrus Road sorting office in the morning hours.

Postal workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the strike was provoked by management bullying and disregard for procedures in relation to the firing of a postal worker.

The union moved to intervene and contain the strike action as quickly as possible. Andy Beeby, chair of the Peterborough branch of the CWU, told the press there had been a disciplinary issue early on Friday, leading to a walkout. He said union officials had been “in discussion with management throughout Friday.”

Talks continued over the weekend. On Monday Beeby announced that officials had “started meetings again ... but staff have not returned to work yet.”

A Royal Mail spokesman said, “Talks aimed at resolving the situation are continuing”, adding that “Royal Mail is fully committed to trying to resolve the concerns of postal workers based in Peterborough by continuing to follow the national jointly agreed framework with the CWU”. The talks concluded with staff returning for the day shift on Tuesday.

The CWU acted swiftly to end the unofficial action by postal workers in the midst of the biggest state privatisation in 20 years. Top CWU officials did everything in their power to prevent the strike from spreading. Amanda Hill, secretary of the union’s Eastern No 5 branch, said the CWU’s position was that

“We’re prepared to negotiate, but not back down. We want to get the rep back to work.”

Previous strikes by postal workers, such as the struggle against the closure of the Whitstable facility early this year, have been betrayed by the CWU. Whitstable postal workers received widespread local community support when they called a strike on January 12. The CWU’s immediate reaction was to begin talks with Royal Mail aimed at preventing further action. The CWU then called off a planned second strike when Royal Mail agreed to a three-week joint review of the closure. Royal Mail announced that the centre would close the following month.

This and other closures flow directly from the CWU’s betrayal of the postal workers strike in 2009. Jane Loftus, at the time a leading member of the Socialist Workers Party, was then president of the CWU Postal Executive Committee. That Committee voted unanimously to call off the 2009 strike and negotiated an interim agreement containing a no-strike clause.

In the subsequent sell-out agreement between Royal Mail and the CWU, “Business Transformation 2010 and Beyond”, the CWU agreed to support closures across the country in preparation for privatising the whole postal service under the guise of “modernisation.”

Early in 2009 the Postal Executive had written that the CWU “accept that the modernisation of Royal Mail is both a necessity and a priority” and that they “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.”

The CWU had, in effect, signed off on privatisation. The government is now attempting to justify the sell-off on the grounds that Royal Mail needs access to private capital to continue its “modernisation programme”. The CWU has already agreed on the necessity of this programme.

Last week Business Minister Michael Fallon urged postal workers to accept a three-year pay deal of 8.6 percent. Publicly the CWU has dismissed the offer, describing it as a sweetener to accept radical changes to pensions and working conditions, including a no strike deal. The CWU is threatening industrial action, but its record suggests this will follow the pattern of the recent betrayals, with limited local actions providing a safety valve while management press ahead with their plans. Royal Mail sources have said that the CWU is being more conciliatory in private, with union officials writing in a memo that they were “committed to further negotiations.”

The primary concern of the CWU is controlling and policing postal workers on behalf of management. Advocating the current pay deal, Fallon told journalists that pay “is a matter for management and the unions to sort out.”

The privatisation of Royal Mail will see it floated on the stock exchange at a value of £2-3 billion. Large tranches of shares will be bought up by banks, hedge funds, and investment organisations.

Four banks have been appointed to prepare the flotation of Royal Mail—reported to be Barclays, UBS, Merrill Lynch and Goldman Sachs—who are likely to benefit to the tune of £30 million.

The fight against privatisation requires a political break from the trade unions and Labour Party that are facilitating it. Workers need to build rank and file committees, independent of the trade unions, to mobilise genuine opposition to all the government’s assaults on wages and conditions.



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