

UK postal workers vote to strike

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The four-to-one majority vote by postal workers in favour of strike action against the newly privatised Royal Mail poses the need for a complete break with the Communication Workers Union (CWU).

Based upon a 63 percent turnout of the 115,000 postal workers balloted, a one-day national strike is due to take place by over 100,000 postal workers on November 4, the first since 2009. But the fact that the strike action in defence of jobs and conditions is only taking place in the aftermath the selloff of Royal Mail speaks to the fact that the CWU have done nothing to oppose privatisation or to defend jobs and conditions.

Even now, Dave Ward, deputy general secretary of the CWU, has made clear the union is seeking to prevent a strike from taking place, has accepted privatisation without a murmur, and wants to establish cordial relations with his new bosses. Speaking after the result of the ballot was announced on October 16, he stated, “We have offered the company a two week period to reach an agreement and having already had many hours of negotiation, this is achievable if there is a will...

“What we want is a ground-breaking, long term, legally binding agreement that not only protects postal workers’ job security, pay and pensions--but will also determine the strategy, principles and values of how the Royal Mail Group will operate as a private entity.”

The CWU should be judged on its record regarding whether it will defend anything.

The Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition has been able to rely on the CWU to suppress any opposition among postal workers ahead of its privatisation plans. In June, postal workers voted overwhelmingly against the Royal Mail selloff by 96 percent on the basis of a 74 percent turnout. The ballot also included support for a boycott of competitor’s mail by a majority of 92 percent. This would have raised the prospect of a confrontation with private

operators, who have been able to cherry pick the most profitable routes within the delivery network since 2006 through deregulation.

The CWU chose to organise this as a consultative ballot, which relieved it of taking any practical action, and it dropped the boycott following a High Court injunction.

Likewise, the Royal Mail’s three-year pay offer below the rate of inflation was rejected. But the CWU stalled the issuing of a strike ballot even after the government confirmed it would proceed with Royal Mail selloff in the autumn. The CWU once again postponed the strike ballot from September 20 to September 27, so the result was delayed until after the public utility was floated on the London Stock Exchange.

Investors got the message. While the government justified fire-sale prices on its share offer by citing the threat of industrial action, shares were snapped up and big profits made by all those who calculated that the CWU was blowing hot air--including by postal workers. The scale of undervaluation of Royal Mail’s shares was evidenced on the first day of trading on the London Stock Exchange on October 15, when shares were sold off at 51 percent above government’s allocation price. The price has continued to rise.

The claim by the CWU that a long-term agreement can be secured to protect jobs and conditions post-privatisation is an insult. The floatation of Royal Mail is the last in a series of privatisations stretching back over 30 years, which have all resulted in mass redundancies, slashing of pay and terms and conditions and asset stripping.

The last national strike in 2009 was called off by the CWU, which entered into secret talks with Royal Mail on the basis of a no-strike agreement while it negotiated the terms of the deal “Business Transformation 2010 and Beyond.” On the basis of a three-year below-

inflation pay increase, the CWU signed up to productivity strings which have slashed jobs and stepped up the exploitation of postal workers.

Through the establishment of a joint management/union working group, the aim of “managing the headcount reduction without leaving unresolved surpluses” has been fulfilled. An estimated reduction in the workforce by 8,000 per year was part of the national agreement. The brunt of the jobs losses have been borne by mail centres as the closure program has accelerated.

Royal Mail has reduced the number of mail centres from 69 to 50 in the last five years. Half of these closures have come in the last year and eight are earmarked for 2013-14. A Royal Mail news release states, “We are working with the CWU on all these changes.”

As part of the 2010 agreement, the CWU agreed to lift the cap on door-to-door deliveries (D2D) while replacing payment by item with a flat weekly bonus. D2D is unaddressed mail--corporate flyers. Postal workers had previously been paid by item and weight. Since 2010, the weekly number of items per household has increased from 3 to 6 and now stands at 7 per household. Postal workers have been forced to take on greater workloads of junk mail with no extra pay. The introduction of automation in the sorting process has likewise been used to increase delivering spans for postal workers.

It is through such increased productivity that Royal Mail has a record increase in profits from £152 million to £440 million. Its core parcels and letters unit posting saw an increase in profit from £33 million to £294 million.

Ward talks about a “race to the bottom” in terms and conditions following privatisation, but the CWU has led the charge. The union has in the process been fully integrated into management. A defining feature of the 2010 agreement was the CWU undertaking to reorganise its internal structures to facilitate greater co-operation with Royal Mail.

The CWU role as industrial policeman is matched by its continued political suppression of postal workers through its alliance with the Labour Party. The CWU claims that Labour in power will renationalise the postal service after it deregulated Royal Mail during its last period in office.

It was Labour which introduced the skewed form of competition in which private operators gained entry points to the most profitable parts of Royal Mail, while riding on the back of its mail delivery network. While the private sector effectively received state-subsidised profits, further pressure was applied on Royal Mail to realign itself on a commercial basis. Labour’s Shadow Business Secretary Chuka Ummuna has dismissed any pledge to renationalise as “completely irresponsible” and “like writing a blank cheque.”

Time and again postal workers have come forward to fight the attacks on jobs and conditions, including numerous wildcats and the national strikes of 2007 and 2009. These struggles have been defeated because they remained trapped within an organisation which functions as an extended arm of management.

A way forward can only be found on the basis of a break from the CWU and the creation of new organisations of struggle through the establishment of action committees, which unite all sections of postal workers, including the growing number of casual and part time workers. This must be based on a socialist political perspective for mobilising the working class against the program of austerity and looting of public assets in the interests of the financial and corporate elite.



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