

Communication Workers Union becomes official tool of management at Royal Mail in Britain

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Following the privatisation of the UK's Royal Mail late last year and the agreement made with the Communication Workers Union (CWU), the union is being totally integrated into management structures.

In return for seats at the top table and the privileges that go with them, the bureaucrats are taking part this month in staff meetings across the UK with Royal Mail management, seeking to impose the terms of the "Agenda for Growth, Stability and Long Term Success" agreement made as part of privatisation.

A postal worker explained what had taken place at one such meeting:

"Royal Mail and the union, the CWU, have recently agreed to a new national agreement. At the weekly meeting this week, when our local management inform us of the recent directives from Royal Mail and whatever else, they started to spell out what this new agreement means.

"We were told the new agreement has gone into effect. We were told the agreement now means that there is no longer a 'you and us' mentality between management and the workforce—that we are all one team working together; that the new way of doing things at Royal Mail was through a joint management/union structure.

"As a result, from now on the CWU representative will also be at the front like the rest of the management to make announcements to us on behalf of Royal Mail/CWU.

"We were told that from now on, any local disputes will be automatically referred to 'independent and trained' mediators—which was another way of saying strikes are ruled out. They claim they are starting from a clean slate—even though there are all sorts of

problems at our office such as heavy workloads and extra work on top.

"They said that managers and CWU reps at various levels, at every office are now jointly reviewing and revising deliveries and workloads—but the whole tone was Royal Mail will be looking to get more out of everyone.

"At our office, we've now been told that several 'lapsed' rounds have been permanent. When a round is lapsed no one takes out that round, and it is divided up among everyone as an extra bundle on top of their rounds, which isn't paid.

"Since I have worked here there have always been lapsed rounds but only at particular times of the year when the mail is supposed to be low. But it seems this will be the first time that they are enforced all year without exception, regardless of how heavy the mail gets or if we can't complete all our usual work in our contracted time.

"It seems it is timing with this agreement. They are forcing the end of lapsing, as a permanent thing with the blessing of the CWU.

"The CWU representative said that we had received a generous pay rise out of this agreement, so it is to be expected that Royal Mail will be looking to get this cost back through making us work harder. They said that's the way things are now.

"They also said that if anyone, while in the office, is caught with any spare time while working their duty, they will be made to do extra work or reassigned to an extra task. What got me the most about this was when they said that not only will the line managers be responsible for this and have the authority to enforce this, but so will the CWU reps. Basically the CWU will

be responsible for ensuring Royal Mail gets all it can out of its members.”

What has happened to this worker is happening to countless others around the country. When the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government announced its intention to privatise Royal Mail there was little support for it from the public or workers in the industry, who voted 78.3 percent in favour of strike action against privatisation on a turnout of 62.7 percent.

However, the CWU made it abundantly clear that outside of a bankrupt campaign to pressure a future Labour government to renationalise Royal Mail, (which Labour leaders insisted they would not) it would do nothing. A strike was called for November 4, after Royal Mail had been floated, and then called it off at the last minute once the CWU had secured its own future in the new organisation.

The suspension of the strike destroyed the claims of groups like the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party, that the CWU and its left-talking General Secretary Billy Hayes were examples of a newfound militancy, expressed at last September’s Trades Union Congress when union leaders had pledged to “wage war on the politics of austerity.”

The agreement is further proof of the complete rout of the trade unions—from the betrayal of mass opposition to attacks on public services, wages and pensions to the defeat inflicted on refinery workers at Grangemouth last year.

After calling off the November 4 strike, postal workers were presented with the new agreement only a month later. A ballot was delayed until the end of January, effectively forming a no-strike pledge over the Christmas period—the busiest time of the year for Royal Mail. It is little wonder that workers voted 94.5 percent vote in favour of the agreement on a 57 percent turnout. Having voted overwhelmingly for strike action against privatisation just a few months previously, postal workers showed they were prepared to fight but now had few illusions the CWU, which was urging acceptance of the deal, would lead it.

In the lead-up to the ballot, the CWU played up the offer of a 9.06 percent pay rise over three years—a 0.1 percent pay rise after (official) inflation—and Royal Mail agreeing to legally binding protections including no “zero hours” contracts, a commitment not to outsource, sell or transfer any part of the business, and

a “pledge” to avoid compulsory redundancies.

These assurances are meaningless. The new agreement does not constrain Royal Mail from employing new workers on single-digit hour contracts, temporary contracts or those employed by agencies. Above all, the so-called protections will be subject to review in five years, essentially based on the dictates of the market and competitive pressure. Royal Mail can ditch them pleading “exceptional circumstances,” including loss of designation as the Universal Service provider and financial considerations.

According to *the Daily Telegraph*, “In return [for the ‘protections’] Royal Mail has curbed the right of the union to call strike action. A new system of mediation will effectively rule out local strike action. Instead industrial action can only be called at a national level by the Communication Workers Union. But a strike will automatically negate the employee protection agreement too... In a statement Royal Mail said the deal ‘represents a joint commitment to radically improve industrial relations and create a can-do culture’.”

The CWU insist, in the face of the obvious truth, that this is not a “no-strike” agreement. However, the CWU has already demonstrated its official role as industrial policeman by, immediately following the ballot result, issuing interim arrangements in conjunction with Royal Mail to bring to a close the 62 local disputes currently active involving postal workers opposed to mail centre closures, exhausting workloads and victimisation.



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