

UK postal workers take unofficial strike action

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The end of October saw at least three unofficial strikes by Royal Mail delivery staff in the south of Britain. The wildcat strikes were uncoordinated and conducted outside of the control of the Communication Workers Union (CWU)—Royal Mail’s official trade union.

In Portsmouth, on October 22, about 120 delivery workers walked out at 7 a.m. in response to the sacking of a postal worker with 15 years of service because he refused to carry out more duties after finishing his shift. Officially, Royal Mail is claiming the worker was dismissed after threatening a manager, but there were no witnesses to the alleged incident.

One worker told the *Portsmouth News*, “We have asked for a review for the way things have been done and they are refusing to give it to us, when we want to be at work. We are not being lazy. We would have been out delivering mail at 7:05 a.m. if they had agreed to it.”

Royal Mail’s initial response was to throw out the belongings of the striking workers. The workers vowed to continue the strike but were persuaded to return to work at lunchtime after the CWU said it agreed to meet with Royal Mail the following week. Andy Couzens, CWU deputy branch secretary, told the *Portsmouth News*, “We will see what happens on Tuesday, we can’t say how things will be until after the meeting. This has been coming for ages. Hopefully on Tuesday, we will nip it in the bud.”

Meanwhile the sacked worker has had to go through the appeals procedure to see if he can be reinstated.

Two days later, on October 24, 80 postal workers at the Royal Mail office in Bridgwater went on an unofficial one-day strike involving about 80 percent of the staff and affecting deliveries to large parts of the town. The action followed a postal worker being sacked

due to sickness absence. One striking worker explained to the *Bridgwater Mercury*, “We have had a member of staff dismissed for her sick record. She has got mitigating circumstances and we feel it is an unfair dismissal.”

The workers returned the next day after Royal Mail announced it “is fully committed to the process of trying to resolve concerns of postal workers based in Bridgwater by following the national jointly-agreed framework with the CWU.”

According to the *Bridgwater Mercury*, the only thing to come out of this were claims by the CWU representative, Dave Chapple, that the sacked postal worker had an “excellent” case to be reinstated immediately and that her appeal would be “fast-tracked.” Royal Mail refused to confirm this.

Finally, on October 27, workers in Plymouth walked out after claims a postal worker had been sacked after she returned from her round later than her finishing time and still had undelivered mail. CWU official Ralph Ferrett merely commented, “There was a brief incident at West Park delivery office but that has been resolved and they are back at work.”

The CWU official insisted, “It was all very brief and resolved very quickly. There was not a dismissal there was a problem with some sort of a disciplinary issue. It was nothing serious at all.”

These walkouts are a result of work speedups and job cuts. Postal workers are being made to absorb extra work on top of their regular duties, even if this takes them over their finishing times and results in unpaid overtime. Time off due to sickness is being clamped down on, even though the job can lead to chronic illnesses.

An atmosphere where management feels it can act with impunity has been cultivated because of the role of

the CWU in keeping disputes local and shutting them down without any real resolution. This was taken to new heights with the national agreement following the privatisation of Royal Mail last year, called the Agenda for Growth, Stability and Long Term Success. It included a de-facto no-strike agreement. As soon as the agreement was signed, the CWU announced a clean slate for Royal Mail and said it would bring 62 outstanding disputes to a close.

A glimpse of the way conditions for postal workers have deteriorated was revealed at a CWU conference earlier this year, with complaints that management bullying and harassment were still continuing despite the “assurances” in the national agreement. The conference failed to pass any policy or proposed action that would even remotely challenge the issues.

It is not without irony that only a few days before the recent walkouts, Royal Mail was awarded with the “Best Employee Relations Initiative Award” from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). The judges praised Agenda for Change as a “project jointly devised” scheme between Royal Mail and the union. It was “a genuine and serious attempt at partnership that already marks a dramatic and convincing turnaround”, the judges said, by “significantly reducing” the number of strikes. In what must be taken as a serious warning by postal workers, the project was described as being in its “early stages”.

The award reveals how the CWU has integrated itself into management structures and consolidated its role as an official industrial policeman. The CIPD judges were “particularly pleased” that “responsibility for organisational growth” was seen as a “joint venture.”

A “growth forum” comprising monthly meetings between the CEO, union officials and senior management had already been established and joint manager-union activities elsewhere “are ensuring the impact is felt on the frontline”.

The CWU has allowed Royal Mail to press ahead with its attacks on postal workers. Where the CWU has got involved, it is only to ensure attacks have gone through with relative ease. This will get worse as the demands for profit rise and competition increases. Royal Mail’s chief rival, TNT Post UK, now known as Whistl, is set to expand its end-to-end mail delivery services in the most profitable areas of the UK. This will leave Royal Mail with less profitable parts it must

deliver to under the universal service obligation. The free shares given to postal workers during privatisation will be little compensation for the attacks that will follow on conditions, pay and jobs.



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