

After overwhelming strike vote at Royal Mail Group rank-and-file postal workers need a socialist strategy

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Workers at Britain's Royal Mail Group (RMG) have returned a 97 percent strike vote in defence of jobs, working conditions and postal services. Parcelforce members also delivered a 95 percent strike vote across two separate ballots.

The national ballot of 110,000 Communication Workers Union (CWU) members held over the last three weeks, has been accompanied by unofficial walkouts, including in Merseyside, Cheshire and Norfolk, against management harassment, bullying and health and safety issues.

Postal workers are determined to fight the relentless assault that has followed the 2013 privatisation of Britain's postal service. Moreover, the strike vote takes place amid an international revival of the class struggle in which workers in country after country, in one globally integrated industry after another, are fighting back against the insatiable demands of the financial markets and hedge funds.

In the US, 48,000 autoworkers are in dispute with GM, one of the world's largest car producers, which is seeking to extend "gig" economy conditions in the car industry.

Like GM, RMG is now largely owned by financial institutions whose sole purpose is to maximise shareholder value. This can only come at the expense of postal workers and RMG customers. Shareholders include Lansdowne Partners, Blackrock, JP Morgan, Standard Life, Soros Fund Management, and the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority. Lansdowne Partners alone controls assets of £20 billion. RMG is listed in the FTSE250 index of leading companies.

RMG has assembled what amounts to a war-cabinet, with a new management team under CEO Rico Back. They are preparing to impose a new regime of part time, short term and zero hours contracts along the lines of what increasingly dominates in the worldwide logistics industry. Back was formerly CEO of GLS, RMG's highly profitable international arm, where 13 and 14-hour shifts for €1,000 a month are the norm.

Back and RMG want to ram through a five-year

restructuring to split Parcelforce delivery from the rest of the postal service as part of moves to break up and outsource more areas of RMG's operations. The future can be seen at RMG subsidiary eCourier where workers lack basic employment rights such as holiday and sick pay and are denied a living wage. Up to 20,000 job losses are threatened across RMG through a review of the Universal Service Obligation, calling six-day-week postal deliveries into question.

A serious warning must be issued: while postal workers are in fundamental conflict with the profit drive of 21st century capitalism, the sole intention of the CWU is to restore its relations with RMG management.

The phony #WeRiseAgain campaign launched by the CWU in August has nothing to do with a genuine fight against the plans of Royal Mail. In a letter to members on August 28, the CWU executive led by General Secretary Dave Ward spelled this out, declaring in capital letters that the strike's purpose is "DEFENDING THE FOUR PILLARS AGREEMENT." The CWU's ballot was framed as a call on RMG to "honour" this agreement.

Described by the CWU as "an Agreement of hope, aspiration and security for both our members and the great British postal service" [!] Four Pillars (4PA) ushered in major attacks on postal workers. Imposed by the CWU and RMG in 2018, it included an inferior pension scheme, reduction in working hours in return for productivity boosts through alterations to delivery routes, new duty patterns, working practices and greater use of technology to monitor performance.

In the words of the CWU, 4PA, "recognised the need to jointly confront the challenges of change." The union's only objection to Rico Back and the new management team is that they "no longer meet with the union at national level and have consistently ignored the joint approach to developing mutual interest solutions to future problems."

While RMG is preparing an all-out assault on postal

workers, the CWU called a national strike ballot for the sole purpose of pressuring management to resume negotiations. The CWU is open about this, stating, “Let’s be clear, we want a negotiated settlement.” Announcing the ballot result at a mass meeting in London, the CWU set no date for strike action. Instead, Ward told the audience that, “We’re going to come out and speak to individual shareholders and explain to them that there’s a better role for postal workers going forward that can make this company very successful.”

The CWU speaks for a privileged layer of officials and administrators whose aim is to convince RMG management they are indispensable in suppressing postal workers’ struggles. They are a de facto labour management organisation on behalf of the employers. They boast that 4PA “was delivered without a single day of Industrial Action being taken.”

The CWU has repeatedly betrayed postal workers. In 2013, Royal Mail workers overwhelmingly opposed privatisation with a 95 percent consultative ballot vote, but the CWU declared they could not legally mobilise against it.

The opposition of postal workers was diverted into a pay ballot that nevertheless won 80 percent backing for a strike—but the strike was called off by the CWU. In the 2017 strike ballot, 90 percent of CWU members voted to strike against RMG’s assault on the pension scheme. That strike was also called off and a substandard pension scheme rammed through.

The CWU has other reasons for avoiding industrial action.

Figures released by the CWU show that workers’ dues contributed £28.7 million in 2018 to the CWU’s coffers. Of this, an extraordinary £8.4 million was paid in remuneration and expenses to CWU staff, of which £7.3 million was salaries and wages. General Secretary Ward pocketed £139,151, more than ten times the average starting wage of a postal delivery worker.

Over the same year, just four strike ballots were called. Of these, only one resulted in strike action—a 4 ½ day stoppage in the Isle of Man. It is the CWU’s record of collaboration with management that is behind the recent outbreak of unofficial strikes and walkouts by a workforce facing daily management bullying and ever-increasing workloads.

Last year £555,185 of CWU members’ money was handed over to the Labour Party. According to the CWU on Twitter, “Labour supports postal workers and will renationalise Royal Mail when in government.”

Really? Does anyone believe that the Labour Party—whose Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell in his interview with GQ just declared that Tony Blair is not a war criminal and invited Alastair Campbell back into the party—will come into conflict with Blackrock, JP Morgan and Standard Life?

All over the world, labour and social-democratic parties

and trade unions rooted historically in the defence of the capitalist nation-state have been fundamentally transformed. They have responded to vast changes in the world economy over the last four decades associated with globalisation by abandoning any striving for reforms in their members’ interests and imposing whatever the companies deem necessary to remain “globally competitive.”

Global production and distribution is now integrated to a degree never seen before in human history, rendering any strategies based on nationalism and an acceptance of capitalism impotent.

This points to the real nature of the dispute being fought out. Postal workers face determined opponents in RMG, the CWU apparatus and the Johnson Conservative government. Their challenge is to mobilise a more powerful social force than those ranged against them. The dispute must be taken out of the hands of the CWU officials by rank and file organisations of postal workers. Rank-and-file committees can mobilise the broadest support in the working class in Britain and internationally—at eCourier, Hermes, DHL, Amazon, FedEx and across mass transport and logistics—where workers face a similar assault on jobs, working conditions, wages, social provisions and democratic rights.

This demands a political break with the trade unions and Labour and a turn towards socialist policies. Postal services internationally must be placed under workers’ democratic control. The struggle for new organisations must be taken up in every delivery and sorting office. We urge postal workers to contact the Socialist Equality Party and discuss this further.

The author recommends:

UK: Bootle Royal Mail workers’ strike sold out by Communication Workers Union
[10 October 2019]



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