

Struggles break out in Inverness, Bristol ahead of UK Royal Mail national strike ballot

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Some 200 Royal Mail workers in Inverness, Scotland are preparing to strike over company mistreatment of disabled employees.

In violation of Royal Mail's own guidelines as well as the Equality Act of 2010, management conducted workplace attendance reviews that specifically targeted disabled workers, with claims that this could be used as a pretext for firing and replacing them. The potential strike could affect the delivery of mail throughout the entire Highlands and Islands region of Scotland.

The Communication Workers Union (CWU) has prepared a strike ballot after stalling any struggle for months. Though workers began to file complaints as long as six months ago, the union only recently addressed the issue. The sheer scope of complaints filed by Royal Mail workers in the Inverness area pushed the CWU to file an investigation, which produced a 16-page document detailing the systematic abuse of disabled staff.

Though the CWU made the decision to issue a strike ballot, their main aim is to reach a resolution with Royal Mail and avoid strikes. "Industrial action is the very worst-case scenario for us," said a local CWU spokesman, acknowledging the union bureaucracy's reluctance to call a strike.

Such attacks are not limited to the Inverness facility but are widespread and systematic. The targeting of disabled employees is bound up with the broader "Amazonification" of Royal Mail, a process by which the company hopes to compete with corporate logistics behemoths like Amazon.

Workers have requested the CWU hold an industrial action ballot at Royal Mail's Filton distribution facility in the greater Bristol area after the company announced job cuts last week.

The Bristol Mail Centre in Filton is the largest Mail

Centre in the South West of England and covers an area stretching from Gloucestershire through Wiltshire and Somerset and includes all postal districts in Bristol.

The company said that 40 workers will be made "voluntarily" redundant, while the CWU estimates that job losses could be as high as 100—a slashing of 10 percent of the current 1,000 strong workforce. As is standard practice for the unions, they will sanction any redundancies on a "voluntary" basis, with their main complaint being—as per the CWU's February 27 national briefing—the "point-blank refusal" of Bristol management "to rule out compulsory redundancies."

Presented as an "efficiency drive" involving the elimination of "redundant" positions, the move represents the replacement of full-time positions with casual, low-wage, part-time work with irregular hours, similar to the hyper-exploitative conditions at Amazon.

Shane O'Riordain, Royal Mail's managing director of regulation, corporate affairs and marketing, spelled out the company's intention to restructure itself along Amazon's lines. "The initiative includes a review of some individual tasks and shift patterns in order for the business to adapt to changing consumer habits," he said. "Consumers are ordering parcels later in the evening with growing demand for next day delivery."

The cuts, due to take place over the course of the next month, have sparked outrage from workers at the facility. "We see agency workers being used to fill vacancies on a daily basis," one worker told the *Bristol Post*. "Managers can't manage and are spending their time doing our work to fill the gaps left by staff shortages. The two-bob parcel machines they've brought in are breaking down all the time. One of them has never worked properly since a dead pigeon fell in it. So, we end up sorting the parcels by hand. And yet we are told there is a massive surplus of staff—it just

doesn't add up."

The CWU is arguing that the cuts were imposed by management without it signing off with them. "Management are forcing through an unagreed revision at the workplace based on figures that are pie in the sky," CWU branch secretary Rob Wotherspoon said in a statement, describing the cuts as a "shocking and irresponsible decision by rogue managers."

In other words, the only objection by the CWU bureaucracy over the job cuts is that they were caught off guard. Wotherspoon's painting of the cuts as a decision made by "rogue managers" is a ruse aimed at distracting workers from the broader context of the frontal assault by the company as a whole. If a strike does go ahead, the union officialdom will undoubtedly employ similar arguments in an attempt to isolate and diffuse it.

The CWU bureaucracy is working to ensure disputes remain under their control and are ended smoothly, amidst the backdrop of the rapid growth of militancy amongst its own rank and file, as evidenced by a seven-day wildcat strike last October called by Royal Mail workers at the Bootle and Seaforth sorting and delivery office over racist insults by management against their Muslim co-workers. The strike escalated when Royal Mail workers from Warrington walked out in support of members of their depot who were suspended for refusing to cross Bootle picket lines.

Workers were due to strike again for two days in January over claims that management had victimised workers following the previous walkout. This involved a union representative and 21 other workers being disciplined. After talks with the CWU and dropping the case against the union official, the strike was called off by the union. The CWU called it off despite some workers still being subject to disciplinary action. A statement by the union January 17 read, "there are still several outstanding disciplinary actions pending against other members of staff. It has been agreed that, if any of these cases reach the level of potential dismissal or suspended dismissal, a fully independent—i.e., non-Royal Mail—manager will be brought in to hear the appeal."

In their national briefing the CWU pointed out that the above disputes were part of "34 requests for local ballots in response to Royal Mail managers' impositions of various instances of executive

actions—ranging from removals of CSS [compact sequence sorter] machines and alterations to shift and duty patterns to unagreed revisions."

The uneasiness of union officials over these largely spontaneous outbursts of resistance by workers takes place within the context of the nationwide strike ballot, which began yesterday with the result due on March 17. More than 800 gate meetings of postal workers took place outside Royal Mail branches across the UK in support of the strike ballot the previous Tuesday. In an indication of the growing militant mood among its members and their determination to fight against the company's attempts at slashing jobs, wages, the CWU said the number of gate meetings was the largest in the history of the union.

The gate meetings took place less than four months after the CWU refused to act on a 97 percent strike vote by Royal Mail workers.

Despite the unprecedentedly high level of pro-strike votes last year, the CWU cravenly capitulated to a High Court injunction aimed at ensuring there was no industrial action during the November/December general election campaign.

The CWU bureaucracy's refusal to mount a struggle in the face of naked state repression demonstrates its hostility to any genuine defence of the living standards of its membership.



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