Union calls off UK Royal Mail strike citing national interest during coronavirus pandemic

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For the second time in four months, the Communication Workers Union (CWU) has defied a massive strike vote of postal workers in Britain, this time with the promise to draft its members into "an additional emergency service" during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Claiming to be acting in "the interests of the nation," the CWU made its announcement within hours of declaring that 94.5 percent, on a turnout of 63.4 percent of its membership in Royal Mail, had voted for industrial action. This would have seen 111,000 workers strike against ongoing and brutal attacks on jobs and conditions. It follows a Yes vote of 97 percent on a turnout of 76 percent last October, which was declared illegal by a High Court injunction. The CWU refused to defy this anti-democratic ruling and took weeks before organising a re-ballot of its members.

The union has now used the coronavirus crisis not only as a cover for a sellout it had already intended, but as an opportunity to prove its unswerving allegiance to Royal Mail and the British state.

The language in the CWU's press statement, signed by General Secretary David Ward and Deputy General Secretary Terry Pullinger, is extraordinary. After acknowledging the "huge mandate" given for industrial action, Ward and Pullinger declare it irrelevant in light of the "changing priorities of our members and the country."

Instead, they intend to put a "proposal to the company based on putting the interests of the nation first," suggesting that Royal Mail workers not only stay on the job but assume the role of "an additional emergency service." The statement continues, "we believe that could really help the country in these unprecedented times."

Not a word of this offer of surrender was discussed with, let alone agreed by, postal workers. The CWU was too busy "writing to the Prime Minister to gain the government's support for this approach." After appealing to Boris Johnson, meetings were held with the employers yesterday "to move this proposal forward," with the union promising to "set aside our differences with Royal Mail."

There is no doubt that this course of action was already worked out with the employers and government representatives long before it was sprung on CWU members.

The CWU's claim that postal workers can set aside their opposition to Royal Mail in pursuit of a united national fight against coronavirus is false and reactionary. Crises of this scale do not suppress class antagonisms. They bring them to a new peak of intensity.

By promising service to "the nation," the CWU bureaucracy is lining up behind Prime Minister Boris Johnson's viciously right-wing Tory party in an escalating conflict with postal workers and the entire working class.

On the day the CWU released its press statement, the Tory government announced "unlimited funds" for business while leaving working people to fend for themselves. There was no commitment to guaranteeing jobs and wages, to close non-essential production on full wages, to implement automatic testing for infection, or to provide basic protection such as hand sanitisers and masks to those forced to work. All that is on offer is less than £100 a week sick pay for those forced to self-isolate and nothing for those in the gig economy.

However, with the CWU leaders and their ilk in mind, Johnson and Chancellor Rishi Sunak declared that the trade unions would enjoy a new role in an "employment support" scheme, alongside the government and employers, enforcing decisions as to who remains in a job while firms shed staff by the tens of thousands. Since mid-February, 200,000 jobs have already gone in the UK's

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leisure and hospitality sectors due to coronavirus, and hundreds of thousands more will follow.

The CWU statement declared that "In any national emergency in our history…the universal postal service has played a pivotal role." The Tories, too, invoke a "wartime effort" and "Blitz spirit." But the real war being waged by the government is not fundamentally against the coronavirus, but against the working class.

This is the experience of postal workers and why they have twice voted overwhelmingly for industrial action. Royal Mail's employees have suffered well over a decade of attacks facilitated by union-organised concessions. Tens of thousands of jobs have been lost and hundreds of workplaces closed. Pensions have been slashed and workloads increased, none of which have sated the demands of global finance. Royal Mail Group's stock has fallen over 70 percent since privatisation in 2013.

Rico Back was parachuted in as CEO in June 2018 specifically to secure the increased extraction of profits for the company's shareholders. These financial interests include The Vanguard Group, UBS Asset Management, Aberdeen Asset Management, Schroders and Threadneedle Asset Management, all in the top 50 global asset management companies with capital in the billions and all pressing for a savage assault on the workforce.

Their demands have not magically disappeared in response to the pandemic. If anything, the lockdown of large sections of the economy will leave the super-rich more determined to squeeze every last ounce of profit out of delivery workers. Amazon is now forcing its UK staff to work overtime to meet the spike in demand for home deliveries caused by social restrictions.

The CWU's call "for Royal Mail Group to step back from their attacks in the workplace" is a transparent fraud. And even this pathetic plea is made not in defence of workers' interests, but on the basis that the employers' attacks are "destroying the very morale and vocational sense of purpose the nation now needs."

The ruling class has the measure of the CWU. After a year of falls and amidst a general collapse of the stock market, Royal Mail's shares actually rose 3.7 percent following the CWU's announcement on Tuesday and was up over 9 percent at time of writing.

For all the talk of "new priorities" arising from the pandemic, the union will do nothing to address postal workers' health concerns.

Strike action would be the basis for demanding safe working conditions and precautions against the spread of the virus, not just in Royal Mail but for the whole working class. Walkouts in recent days by Royal Mail workers in London, outsourced workers in the NHS and other workers in Italy, Canada and the United States demonstrate the desire for a fight over corporations' and governments' refusal to put in place basic safety measures. In contrast, the CWU wants to work as an "emergency service" for a Tory government that has already declared its intention to ban strike action in all essential services.

The pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Workers Party and Socialist Party—whose members occupy lucrative positions within the union bureaucracy—will either apologise for the CWU's actions or complain of a mistaken policy, while calling for militant pressure on the leadership to change course.

The truth is that CWU and its counterparts have been completely integrated into the machinery of management and are eager to obtain the same position within the highest echelons of the capitalist state. If workers are to truly combat the dangers posed by COVID-19 amid the growing threat to their livelihoods and even their lives, they must do so independent of and in opposition to these rotten bureaucracies by forming rank-and-file committees.

The ruling class's reactionary response to the social and economic crisis intensified by the coronavirus pandemic must be combatted by an independent programme of the international working class, guided by the socialist criteria of meeting the needs of the population, not the profit expectations of multimillion-pound corporations and their paid-for politicians and lackeys in the unions.

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