UK Royal Mail workers oppose union citing coronavirus to justify strike vote sellout

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The Communication Workers Union (CWU) decision to ignore an overwhelming strike vote by its membership and instead offer workers up as "an additional emergency service" during the COVID-19 pandemic has met with widespread opposition.

On Tuesday, the CWU announced a vote of 94.5 percent in favour of strike action, on a turnout of 63.4 percent of their 111,000 members in Royal Mail. This was immediately followed by a statement suspending any industrial action and offering to "set aside our differences" with management in "the interests of the nation." In return, the union politely asked the employers to end their vicious attacks on the workforce for the duration of the coronavirus crisis.

While there is no way to determine the majority position among CWU members, the announcement has received considerable criticism on online forums. There is a widespread recognition that no goodwill will be forthcoming from Royal Mail. The company are engaged in a five-year restructuring plan under new CEO Rico Back to reassure nervous shareholders that profits and dividends, extracted from the workers, will continue to flow. In this context, several CWU members commented that the union's decision must be a cause for celebration at company headquarters—"I bet they can't believe their luck," one said.

"Royal Mail Management will indeed pick up your proposal and be rubbing their hands at the prospect of them having more time unopposed to drive their change through. Coronavirus means nothing to them it's profit, profit, profit and shareholders first and last."

Others wrote: "RM [Royal Mail] will not honour a period of calm, they will push on regardless" and "the push for more cost cutting will be relentless." "Management will use [the CWU proposal] to accelerate Executive Action."

And more: "There is no way Royal Mail will halt its strategy, they will just plough on as they know f-all will happen." "Of course they're going to continue they are all about money and that's it I can't believe how naive the union are being by thinking the Royal Mail will give a truce NO CHANCE!"

Given Royal Mail's ruthless drive for profits, many have argued that the only option was to take industrial action: "If we don't strike Royal Mail will take full advantage and follow through on their plans to streamline the business and cut thousands of jobs. We must fight." "Royal Mail will carry on doing the same thing they been doing and so we should carry on and strike."

"If RM are pressing ahead with Executive Action, then we should press ahead with Industrial Action ... If the company cannot call a truce, then why should we be put at a disadvantage?"

"If we don't take [industrial action] this time we're f****d, coronavirus nothing to do with our ballot or actions from it we are still working after all."

Royal Mail workers have seen national strike action cancelled repeatedly, with no reference to the wishes of the membership. Several comments on online forums pointed to the arbitrary and unaccountable way in which the union's "emergency service" proposal was made, striking a deal between the union bureaucracy, the employers and the government:

"Why hasn't the CWU spoken to its members in Royal Mail before offering up the people who work on the frontline as an emergency service, we have family's and our own health issues as well. Most of us would help as best we can, but it would be nice to actually be asked rather then offered up like some commodity."

"So do we get a vote or choice in the decision of us

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the members being put forward as another emergency service?"

Proposals for an emergency service are wholly unrealistic without placing an impossible additional strain on an already overstretched workforce. Workers told the CWU, "You can't ask us to do any more than what we do already." One explained, "Most walks in our office are to the max time limits, not much time left for social helping …" Another asked, "How are we meant to provide this when many of our work force would be in the high risk category and will be advised to take 12 weeks off work? A strategy needs to be in place. Will our members in the high risk get their wages for the 12 weeks?"

One worker made the point that the CWU have lined up with the government against their own members: "But you're not fighting for the customers or politicians, we voted for our terms to be upheld ... We are a postal service not an emergency service ..."

The union's claim that its pledge to work with the employers is out of concern for the health risks of coronavirus is refuted by the working conditions it has accepted for Royal Mail workers. As one commenter warned: "If PPE [personal protective equipment] and basic hygiene is not taken seriously, the new emergency service will be distributing the virus as well as food bank parcels ..."

Like corporations across the world, Royal Mail is indifferent to the health of its workforce. "They can pay millions to a CEO but can't provide hand wash and sanitizer," wrote one worker. "Bexleyheath office have no gloves, no hand sanitizers and two people have the symptoms in our office, yet we are still in and office has not been deep cleaned." And: "Only water to wash my hands in my office now, if no soap or hand sanitizer tomorrow morning and I'm walking out, will CWU back me?"

Some have drawn important lessons from this episode about the motivations of the union bureaucracy:

"So while Royal Mail continue their executive action in their relentless assault on our terms and conditions, our union leaders in their ivory towers nowhere near the front line put us up to be another emergency service."

"Shame on the CWU, shame on you, if we contaminate just one person and god help it something happens to them because you want to put us as an emergency service then shame on you ... not that you lot will be bothered because as long as you look good that's all that matters hey, hope you lot can sleep well with your nice big fat pay cheques."

Even among Royal Mail workers sympathetic to the idea of suspending industrial action in the face of an unfolding global disaster, there is an insistence that Royal Mail Group must cease its attacks on jobs and conditions.

Two workers commented on social media: "Don't have a problem in the present climate to hold back on any industrial action as long as the company stops its executive action," and "If it's decided that we the union are not striking at this time despite a yes vote for the right reasons then the business must agree to stop the ongoing stripping of rights and conditions."

Another said: "If executive action continued, no matter what else is happening, you have to follow through with what we voted for."

The crucial task now for Royal Mail workers is to draw the political conclusions from these events. The CWU are on the side of the employers. If attacks on jobs and conditions are to be fought, then this must be done independently of the bureaucracy through rank-and-file organisations of the workers themselves.

This is also the only basis on which a serious global response can be mounted to the coronavirus pandemic. We urge workers to read and discuss the article "Union calls off UK Royal Mail strike citing national interest during coronavirus pandemic" and to contact the WSWS to begin organising a fight for this perspective.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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