

UK: Communication Workers Union seeks unity with Royal Mail against postal workers

Thomas Scripps
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On Monday evening, the Communication Workers Union (CWU) issued a statement outlining its proposed response to the coronavirus crisis and its effect on Royal Mail workers.

Two weeks ago, the union called off industrial action voted for by 94.5 percent of its 110,000-strong membership on a 63.4 percent turnout, instead promising to form “an additional emergency service” for the duration of the coronavirus crisis. It offered to “put aside their differences” with management in “the interests of the nation” and asked the employers and the government to look after workers’ safety and halt their attacks on conditions in return.

The CWU’s announcement, signed by General Secretary Dave Ward and Deputy General Secretary Terry Pullinger, supposedly gives “further consideration to the fast moving Coronavirus crisis and how this is impacting on frontline workers, the country and the ability of Royal Mail Group to maintain its network operations.” It calls for the implementation of 16 “emergency service principles” to “ensure Personal Protective Equipment [PPE] is in place for all employees, minimise the further spread of the virus and save lives, whilst maintaining an emergency network with prioritised services.”

Ward and Pullinger have written what amounts to a devastating indictment of the union bureaucracy’s own actions. The protective measures listed in the document should have been implemented weeks ago. That the CWU is now appealing for the most basic sanitary protections is an admission of the desperately unsafe conditions it volunteered its membership into when calling off the planned national strike.

Ward and Pullinger refer to the “fast moving Coronavirus crisis” in the hope of hiding the fact that these dangers were already apparent when they made their first grovelling appeal to Royal Mail when calling off industrial action. They use the same “fast-moving” line as Boris Johnson’s Conservative government, used to justify its own criminally delayed and negligent response to the pandemic.

The truth is that by the time the CWU pledged to form an additional emergency service for “the nation,” many of its

members had walked out of postal depots in London over COVID-19 fears. The *World Socialist Web Site* wrote then:

“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.”

We then cited numerous Royal Mail employees who angrily reported appalling sanitary conditions in their workplaces.

The only thing the CWU gave these workers as assurance for their safety was the promise of talks with Royal Mail and a letter to Prime Minister Boris Johnson!

Postal workers have had long and bitter experiences with such negotiations being used to demobilise action, while the employers prepare their assault. Several workers made the point that they would expect strike action immediately if there was no change in the company’s behaviour, and that they had no faith that the company would budge an inch.

One said on a social media forum, “If RM [Royal Mail] are pressing ahead with Executive Action, then we should press ahead with Industrial Action...why should we be put at a disadvantage?”

Another commented, “Royal Mail Management will indeed pick up your [the CWU’s] proposal and be rubbing their hands at the prospect of them having more time unopposed to drive their change through.”

These predictions have proved correct. Social media is filled with reports of unsafe and unnecessary work being carried out in departments across the country.

In a mark of the anger building up amongst a broad section of workers, walkouts took place in Southwark, London and Bridgewater in the South West of the country last week, demanding improved protections against the virus. On Monday morning, nearly a hundred workers at the Royal Mail sorting office in Alloa, Scotland, launched a wildcat

strike to protest delivering junk mail, unsafe working conditions and a lack of protective equipment. Fifteen postal workers walked out of another Royal Mail depot, Lochgelly in Fife, for a second day Tuesday.

An Alloa postal worker told the *Daily Record*, “Royal Mail has asked us to continue delivering non essential junk mail to every household which not only puts us at extra risk, but also vulnerable people in the community because the virus can be transmitted on letters and flyers. They are putting profit over everyone’s health.

“We work on top of each other in the sorting office and it hasn’t got any better since the outbreak. The managers don’t seem to be bothered by it and just want us to continue working as normal which isn’t possible or fair.

“The only PPE we’ve been given are gloves and sanitiser that turned up on Monday. It’s not good enough.”

On Wednesday, a postal worker contacted the WWS and said, “Royal Mail are going to start cracking down on absences: New rules are, if you have to take time off to care for loved ones with covid or self-isolate because someone in house is infected, you won’t get paid unless you take as annual leave. If you are sick with covid it will only be recognised as such if you have seen a doctor and have a doctor’s note saying so. My friend said the guys at his place are livid.”

For the CWU, these events came as a warning. Alarmed by the prospect of mass independent action, the union issued its statement with the sole aim of heading off any rank-and-file struggle. The words “strike” and “industrial action” do not appear once in the document. Instead, the CWU meekly present “what we believe is the right position for the company and the Government to immediately adopt” and let Royal Mail know they are “available to discuss with you any alternative suggestions. ...”

This “ever-so-humble” appeal was made to a company that has sacked thousands of workers over the last decade and is hellbent on a new round of attacks under CEO Rico Back and to a government whose inaction in response to the pandemic will cost thousands of lives.

The CWU’s “principles” are purely for the record. Its talk of an emergency service is a fraud, designed to cover for the business-as-usual profit-making of Royal Mail.

This rotten policy has been endorsed by the Socialist Party (SP), with a CWU branch secretary writing on its website, “The CWU has sought to put pressure on Royal Mail management and the Tory government by demanding that postal workers should be regarded as providing emergency services during the virus outbreak, such as through delivering urgent medical supplies to people self-isolating and other vulnerable and elderly people.

“This has now effectively happened, with Royal Mail

workers being put on the list of ‘key workers’.”

What does this “victory” signify in practice? The CWU has succeeded in keeping workers on the job on behalf of the government and on its terms. As for how workers’ jobs and safety can be secured, the Socialist Party says that “there are mixed signs coming out of Royal Mail, with indications of an internal battle at the very top. We saw a day’s delay in them responding to the offer of talks with the CWU, which could have been due to those at the top debating how to deal with the dispute in the changed situation.”

The policy of the CWU and its errand boys in the SP is to seek an agreement with an imaginary “reasonable” section of the employers. Such is the politics of betrayal. Predictably, Dave Ward tweeted yesterday complaining that Royal Mail had refused to make any of the changes proposed by the CWU. The CWU would now write to the government and the Trades Union Congress and consult with lawyers.

There is a strong case for an emergency postal service being organised, with all necessary steps taken to protect the lives and livelihoods of those involved or required to stay at home. But this task cannot be accomplished under the private ownership of Royal Mail and the criminal leadership of the government. It requires the independent action of postal workers—organised in rank-and-file committees and in alliance with other sections of the working class—in opposition to the CWU bureaucracy and based on a socialist programme of class struggle, not negotiations with the bosses.



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