

Royal Mail rejects all demands for basic coronavirus safety measures, but CWU continues to block strike

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This Wednesday, the Communication Workers Union (CWU) issued a press release detailing its much-desired meeting with Royal Mail to discuss working conditions during the coronavirus crisis. It makes abundantly clear that precisely nothing has or will come from the CWU's policy of talks with management. The time has come for postal workers to organise their own action, independent of the union bureaucracy, to protect the health and lives of themselves and their families, as well as all those to whom they deliver mail.

When the CWU called off a strike after an overwhelming vote in favor of strike action on March 17, they did so with the claim that a gentlemen's agreement could be reached with Royal Mail and Boris Johnson's Conservative government. The union offered to "set aside our differences with Royal Mail" and "gain the government's support" for turning Royal Mail into an "additional emergency service," in return for the fond hope that the company would "step back from attacks in the workplace" and implement safe working practices.

Two weeks later, on Monday, against a background of wildcat strikes by postal workers, the CWU was forced to admit that no goodwill was forthcoming from Royal Mail. The union had cancelled a strike to send its members into potentially life-threatening working conditions. Once again, the CWU refused to organise any industrial action, hoping to demobilise postal workers with yet another appeal to "the company and the Government to immediately adopt" a series of safety principles.

Just three days after this statement was released, the CWU have got their answer from the company, and been sent packing. According to General Secretary

Dave Ward and Deputy General Secretary Terry Pullinger, Royal Mail CEO Rico Back refused to attend the meeting pleaded for by the CWU. His representatives were sent with a clear message for the union and for postal workers: "Get stuffed!"

Quoting from the CWU's own press release:

"The following will summarise what the company stated at the meeting and the content of their subsequent letter:

- Despite the increasing pressure on our members through growing sick absence/self-isolation, the company do not believe we need to alter national service standards to move to an emergency network.

- Royal Mail will not cease the delivery of D2D [door to door] advertising mail.

- Royal Mail will not change their sick absence process, which is punishing innocent CWU members, many of whom who have suffered major illness recently.

- Royal Mail said during the meeting it is safe for you to work in your offices without the full provision of Personal Protective Equipment. Royal Mail believe washing hands is the 'gold standard' for safety and enough protection for employees.

- Royal Mail could not provide any information on how many offices have the necessary PPE in place.

- Royal Mail stated the safety concerns of CWU members are not widespread. They said their feedback from managers is much more balanced.

- Royal Mail have declined an offer to jointly approach Government on our proposal.

- The CEO confirmed that he does not wish to meet the union anymore during this pandemic.”

Royal Mail and its shareholders are determined to extract every last drop of profit from postal workers, whatever the costs to their health. And they can’t even be bothered to maintain a pretence of discussion with the CWU.

Faced with this slap in the face and sitting on a huge mandate for strike action delivered less than a month ago, the CWU’s only response is to turn to Boris Johnson with an appeal for more talks! Under a section titled “Next Steps,” Ward and Pullinger announced that they will be writing to the government—which has put the whole country at risk with its response to the pandemic—and also to the Trades Union Congress, which, given their slavish alliance with Johnson, amounts to the same thing. The union will also be “issuing appropriate press statements.”

The CWU’s press release includes two short paragraphs saying:

“If Personal Protective Equipment is not in place for all employees, or in any workplace, then that office should cease its operations until the equipment has been provided to all employees. This includes gloves and hand sanitisers.

“If social distancing measures are not in place, in line with the Government advice (2 metres apart), then the office should be closed until this is rectified. Additional measures in this statement are designed to support the introduction of strict social distancing in every Royal Mail Group workplace.”

The CWU is taking Royal Mail’s declaration that washing your hands is the “gold standard” to heart—washing its hands of the responsibility to defend its own members. It makes individual workers and workplaces responsible for closing down depots, while

providing themselves with a “get out clause” for refusing to organise any action themselves.

Postal workers have already taken to social media to denounce this latest CWU betrayal:

“Why are the CWU not telling us to down tools? You’ve had your yes vote, RMG [Royal Mail Group] have made it clear they don’t want to work with the union, even in this crisis we need to strike! It’s the only way RMG will listen and the only way to keep frontline staff safe! What are you not getting?”

“Tell them don’t ask them. Walk out of offices that are putting your members in danger. Get off your **** Dave Ward and protect your members!!”

“Can you not send the head union rep into each office and shut them down if they are not doing social distancing or giving out sanitiser? Or just strike till every office gets the equipment, Royal Mail aren’t an emergency service like union like to think.”

Important political conclusions must now be drawn. The last few weeks of union activity—during which many workers undoubtedly became infected—were a pantomime. The CWU’s sole intention has been to maintain a well-paid seat at the negotiating table with Royal Mail and the government, under the guise of establishing an “emergency service.”

If the CWU will not act even when its members’ lives are imperilled, then of what possible use is the union? Royal Mail workers have reached the end of the road with the CWU. Like workers everywhere, they have been brought face to face with the transformation of the trade unions into appendages of corporate management and the state.

Royal Mail workers must take matters into their own hands. Rank-and-file committees independent of the CWU bureaucracy must be established in every workplace to co-ordinate the action the union has sought to block, while reaching out to workers in other industries facing similar dangerous conditions.

Those who want to organise a genuine fightback of this kind should contact the Socialist Equality Party and build the new socialist leadership that is required.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)