

Postal workers at four UK depots take unofficial strike action over lack of safety measures

Paul Lee
8 April 2020

Postal workers in four separate parts of the country, Hedge End in Hampshire, Winchester and Medway in Kent and Warrington in Cheshire have taken unofficial strike action in recent days over safety concerns regarding the coronavirus pandemic.

Workers in Hedge End walked out because of an “unsafe workplace,” one said. They felt that Royal Mail had treated them “with no respect.”

According to one worker, the strike in Hedge End had been “bubbling up for several weeks.” Postal workers at Hedge End face similar conditions to those all over the country. One month into the pandemic, postal workers are still not able to social distance and have a lack of personal protection equipment when out delivering mail.

As one worker said, “How are we supposed to wash our hands on a four-hour shift delivering post? It is just ridiculous, and some of us are having to supply our own equipment.”

Postal workers have received backing from residents in Winchester, who have taken to social media to show their support.

On Tuesday, staff at Royal Mail's delivery office in Warrington walked out after a manager was suspected to have tested positive for Covid-19. The *Warrington Guardian* noted that his co-workers at the “Milner Street office refused to work after concerns grew about a colleague's health and lack of PPE [personal protective equipment].”

The paper cited a worker who said, “We walked out over concerns that one of the managers has coronavirus and been handing out work loads and van keys all week. It is putting the public at risk as we deliver to everyone in Warrington and they want the parties to

continue delivering. We were told the man was admitted to hospital due to breathing difficulties. He was tested in the hospital and this came back positive.”

Management claimed that the Warrington office would be deep cleaned Tuesday evening and the worker added, “They want us all back in tomorrow as normal. The staff are extremely concerned about spreading it around to the public, specifically the elderly and vulnerable. Personally I have many of those people in my area.”

Last October, delivery drivers at the Warrington mail centre walked out in solidarity, in another dispute, after refusing to cross the picket lines of workers at a depot in Bootle, Liverpool.

The Communication Workers Union (CWU) were keen to distance themselves from the walkout over coronavirus safety issues at Warrington, insisting that it not even be categorised as any form of industrial action. Union branch secretary Dave Kennedy told the newspaper that the CWU was “in high level talks with the company over this incident”. He declared, “It is important that we assert at this stage that we don't consider that the safety measures taken by our membership should be considered as industrial action. Rather, our members have exercised their legal right to remove themselves from a potentially hazardous situation--designed to protect their own wellbeing, their family members and the wider population of Warrington.”

Before these latest strikes had broken out, postal workers in Scotland had taken unofficial action over similar safety concerns. Communication Workers Union (CWU) members at a delivery office in Alloa, Clackmannanshire, walked out on Monday, refusing to

deliver any more junk mail. At the same time, postal workers are being forced to deliver over 30 million letters containing the UK government's coronavirus health advice. One worker said, "Postmen and women are dying delivering leaflets and non-essential items. There should be outrage amongst all posties and the public."

It was announced recently that two postal workers had died of the coronavirus.

One postal worker expressed the anger felt by thousands, saying, "We get told the golden rule is to wash hands but when you are out on delivery, everywhere is shut, so it is impossible to do, and it is impossible to keep two metres apart. People at home are treating it like a second Christmas, so we are hammered every day with packets, which makes the spread of the virus a high risk. This is why Royal Mail is mistreating us. They are making the shareholders a fortune, and we are sitting ducks!"

The callous way Royal Mail has acted is made possible by the CWU. Knowing the danger from the beginning, the union offered postal workers up on a plate to the government by calling off a planned strike and proposing to act as a "fifth emergency service."

It is only when postal workers have taken unofficial action that the CWU has been forced to respond—but only verbally. CWU General Secretary Dave Ward said that if workplaces did not have the right safety and social distancing measures, "You should not be working, and we will back you."

But actions speak louder than words, as the WSWs stated, "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."

Like their colleagues in Hedge End, Winchester, Medway and Alloa, postal workers must now take matters into their own hands. Rank-and-file committees

independent of the CWU bureaucracy must be established in every workplace to coordinate strike action wherever there is a failure to defend the workforce from infection. Postal workers must also reach out to workers in other industries facing similar dangerous conditions, especially in delivery services such as Amazon, cutting across all attempts to pit one section of the working class against another. Those who want to organise a genuine fightback should contact the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact