

UK postal worker says: Royal Mail workers need to set up rank-and-file committees

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The following article was submitted to the WSWS by a UK postal worker.

Another British postal worker has died from the coronavirus. Selim Ghebru Gaim, 34, worked in a sorting office in Leeds. He tested positive for coronavirus after showing mild symptoms but was later admitted to intensive care at St. James's Hospital. Selim died on April 15.

Selim was born in Sudan and was educated in Russia before joining Royal Mail at Leeds sorting office. His family spoke of their devastating loss. Selim's cousin Danait Fikadu said, "Our dearly loved son, brother and friend Selim has sadly passed away. He moved to the UK for a better life, where he lived a normal life working and bettering himself." In Selim's memory, the family have launched a GoFundMe fundraiser. The money raised will go towards funeral costs. Selim died 11 days after his 34th birthday.

Three other postal workers have already died while over 26,000 postal workers have either contracted the virus or are self-isolating. Three deceased workers have been named: Stefan Haluszczak, who worked at Coventry Parcels Hub, Akie Fenty from Peterhead, Aberdeenshire, and Bola Omoyeni, who was employed at the National Distribution Centre in Northampton. Haluszczak, who had worked for Royal Mail for eight years, was well-respected at his depot.

Postal workers are forced to work in unsafe conditions, largely without personal protective equipment (PPE), adequate hand cleansing facilities or social distancing. We are delivering items whose volume is outstripping levels seen at Christmas, with staff from around the UK being asked to work overtime at the most overrun centres in the North East.

Royal Mail still refuses to pay thousands of postal workers who are off sick after possibly being exposed to coronavirus. Workers are forced to take "holiday or

unpaid leave."

We have two worlds. One world is being habituated by postal workers who are forced to work in conditions that are leading to an early death. Postal workers up and down the country have taken unofficial strike action in defiance of Royal Mail threats and bullying and without the backing of the Communication Workers Union (CWU). In some offices in London, an overtime ban is in place.

Royal Mail will brook no opposition to its profit-making during the COVID-19 crisis. At one of its mail centres it called riot police when two indoor postal workers said they would not cooperate with management's "unreasonable" demands. CWU officials at the mail centre describe what happened: "Royal Mail, over what could easily be described as a 'petty' issue, opted to call the police, who came out with a riot van, to have these members removed from the building. Think about that for a second. your employer called the police to have two of your colleagues physically removed from our workplace."

The dispute occurred when two skilled workers who are trained to operate a sorting machine refused to move to another area. Royal Mail attempted to replace the workers with less-skilled agency workers. The CWU rep said, "The fact that a riot van pulled up outside the mail centre made people think, what the hell is going on? It is ludicrous. It seems to be the attitude of some managers at the moment."

The second world is a million miles away from the danger faced by postal workers when arriving at their work, knowing that their lives are in peril each day. That world is occupied by Royal Mail's fat-cat executives, whose callous actions have led to even the right-wing *Daily Mail* newspaper calling for them to behave more responsibly.

Suffice to say Royal Mail have ignored this plea and

have ramped up their profit-making by cancelling its final pay-out to investors last month in order to boost its balance sheet during the coronavirus outbreak. It is a move that has meant that shares held by postal workers are becoming virtually worthless. Big shareholders like Schroders, with 15.3 percent, have warned Royal Mail that it expects the “pain to be shared by management.”

It is understood that the UK’s biggest asset manager intends to raise the issue with all the companies it is invested in. Schroders boss Peter Harrison has agreed to donate a chunk of his pay to charities fighting the pandemic. Another big shareholder said, “Royal Mail needs to explain how its executive pay arrangements will reflect this change as well as any significant changes made to the pay of its wider workforce.”

We should be clear that these fat cat shareholders are not interested in, nor do they care about postal workers, other than to increase their level of exploitation without it provoking large-scale strike action. That is why they are telling Royal Mail executives to behave themselves.

They are going to have to talk very loudly. Not only because the majority of these executives are not even in the country—Rico Back, the chief executive, whose salary is around £2.7 million a year, is sitting in his penthouse home worth £2.3 million overlooking Lake Zurich in Switzerland—but because their privileged existence makes them deaf to all appeals for restraint.

Perhaps a third world should be added, and that is the world of the CWU. Their answer to Royal Mail executives gorging themselves during this crisis has been to call for the company to drop deliveries of advertising mail to ease the pressure. It stated that “In conjunction with the government we should look to maximise the opportunity for Royal Mail’s unrivalled infrastructure to be utilised in helping the country deal with the coronavirus crisis.”

The CWU had peddled this line from day one, even after postal workers voted for strike action over job losses and attacks on working condition. The CWU called off a recent national strike after a 94 percent vote in favour of action on March 17. The union then called for “a gentlemen’s agreement” which could be negotiated with Royal Mail and the 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.”

I have been a postal worker for over a decade now and the time has come for we Royal Mail workers to take the struggle out of the hands of the CWU bureaucracy and into our own. Rank-and-file committees must be formed. This is now a life and death struggle.



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