

UK: Postal workers at Bridgewater walk out as six COVID-19 cases confirmed at Wellingborough

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Postal workers at Bridgewater delivery office took unofficial strike action last week over a manager reneging on an agreement between the Communication Workers Union (CWU) and Royal Mail. This is the second time postal workers have taken strike action at this office.

One hundred postal workers walked out after “reaching breaking point” over “aggressive” and “anti-union behaviour” by someone described as a “rogue” manager. The strike was backed by 99.7 percent of the workforce.

When workers voted by a narrow margin to return to work, they were forced back out again on strike when the manager again reneged on the agreement.

One worker said they had “never seen anything like this. It appears that the local management team do not agree with the agreement made with Royal Mail nationally.”

The strike was taken after grievances that had occurred over the last six weeks came to a head. Workers have faced threats of disciplinary action such as “wilful delay of the mail,” which can lead to instant dismissal.

Managers have followed union reps around the office to intimidate the entire workforce. One worker explained, “Members have reached a breaking point over issues that have built up over the last six weeks and do not feel like they have been treated with dignity and respect in the workplace, and that is why it’s got to the point where people have walked out.”

A spokesperson said Royal Mail was “disappointed” by the strike action and was “working through the issues raised and continue to engage with the CWU to find a resolution.”

It has not taken long for the much-heralded working relationship between Royal Mail’s new CEO Keith Williams and the CWU to be revealed for what it is—a mechanism to impose drastic changes to working conditions. Williams promised on his first day to ensure “an accelerated pace of change across the business.”

The CWU in fact green-lighted the attacks at Bridgewater and other offices around the country. Throughout the pandemic, the trade unions have either never called strike action or, in the case of the CWU, sabotaged a vote to take it. To cover their backs, the CWU et al. then said they would “support” members who exercised their legal right to refuse to work in unsafe conditions. This conveniently meant that the CWU did not need to call its members out or extend any genuine protection against victimisation.

It is likely that the “rogue” management at Bridgewater have been told by Royal Mail headquarters to “test the water” for a stepped-up attack on postal workers. The union have once more pleaded with Royal Mail, saying, “Royal Mail must now re-consider their whole management strategy at Bridgewater and appoint managers who are prepared to work with the union.”

The result of this collaboration is clear to see. Postal workers are catching COVID-19 at an alarming rate and at least four have already died with coronavirus. Only recently, an outbreak of six new cases was reported at Wellingborough Royal Mail delivery office in Northampton. Two workers are in hospital, with one reported to be “very poorly.”

One worker expressed the concerns of the whole office when he said, “Although PPE [personal protective equipment] have now been provided there has been no training on how to use them safely.” Local

newspaper the *Northants Telegraph* was also told by workers that no social distancing measures are in place and that the office has not been closed for a deep clean, as operations continue as usual.

This comes only two weeks after walkouts over safety fears at Royal Mail offices in Peterborough, Cambridgeshire and High Wycombe, near London, after employees tested positive for the virus. The month before, postal workers at Bury St. Edmunds, Chatham, Southampton, Stoke-on-Trent, Warrington, Didcot, Edinburgh, Alloa and Fife took unofficial action over safety.

Workers at Wellingborough were deliberately kept in the dark about the infections in their office until a worker announced the COVID-19 cases over the public address system. The worker complained that management had kept silent about the virus.

Royal Mail issued its usual perfunctory statement saying, “Royal Mail takes the health and safety of its colleagues, its customers and the local communities in which we operate very seriously. Throughout this crisis, every decision we make puts the health of our people and customers first.”

This is now a life or death situation facing postal workers. The essential conclusion that must now be drawn is that the fight for safe working conditions and against Royal Mail’s offensive means postal workers taking matters into their own hands, organising rank-and-file action committees, independent from the CWU.



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