

Talks between Royal Mail and the Communication Workers Union will end in job losses

A socialist postal worker
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The following comment article was submitted to the WSWS by a British postal worker.

Talks between Royal Mail and the Communication Workers Union (CWU) mark a new stage in their joint offensive against pay, working conditions and health.

The track record of the CWU is proof of this.

In 2014, the union signed off on the “Agenda for Growth” agreement. The current general secretary of the CWU, Dave Ward, was part of the negotiating team that accepted what was tantamount to a no-strike deal, agreeing to the clause:

“The employer shall be entitled to notify the CWU at any time that any of the Protections will no longer continue, if...there is national-scale industrial action (in the form of a strike or action short of a strike) which has been authorised at the national level by the CWU [which] will have, or is reasonably likely to have, a...disruptive effect.”

Ward, portrayed as a “left” by groups such as the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party, is a champion of a “partnership approach.” The pseudo-left groups made much of Ward’s campaign for general secretary, especially his “no blind loyalty to Labour” stance. But blind or not, Ward is certainly loyal to the Labour Party bureaucracy.

Throughout negotiations, Ward has bragged about bringing Royal Mail to the table and demanding adherence to the 2017 Four Pillars Agreement. The CWU claims this heralded a new way of working, enshrining postal workers’ pay and condition in law. Four Pillars was a sellout and included an inferior pension scheme, reduction in working hours in return for productivity boosts through alterations to delivery routes, new duty patterns, new working practices, and

greater use of technology to monitor performance.

The CWU said that Four Pillars would see a reduction of part-time work and increase full-time jobs. The opposite has happened. There has been a growth of 20-hour and 25-hour contracts, both on worse pensions than full-time workers, which have led to the creation of a two-tier workforce. Calling for the retention of the 2017 Four Pillars Agreement, which included a range of cost “efficiencies” to the detriment of workers, has only guaranteed the CWU a seat at the table.

Royal Mail Chairman Keith Williams and UK Operations CEO Stuart Simpson have paid lip service to the Four Pillars Agreement, while seeking to impose former CEO Rico Back’s plan for further attacks. The CWU has accepted the accelerated attacks on postal workers’ conditions, saying, “We know things have to change.”

Behind the backs of workers, the CWU is agreeing fundamental changes in working practices that will be to the detriment of most postal workers. To clear the path for these changes, the union has cleared 600 disagreements off the table so that Royal Mail will be given free rein to impose revisions or job cuts without the threat of strike action.

Dave Ward and his deputy, Terry Pullinger, spoke of the need to accept the revisions because Royal Mail had backed down over its move to separate off Parcelforce from letters. They insisted, “We cannot always be in dispute mode, we have to move things forward. If nothing moves, we end up with no industry and no job.”

The CWU has echoed Royal Mail’s mantra, saying that post-workers must ask themselves, “How can we make some savings?” The CWU even had the nerve to

say that some revisions “can go the members’ way in some places.”

Working with the CWU has necessitated Royal Mail bosses changing tactics but not their long-term plans.

It has been mooted that a new deal will undermine the Universal Service Obligation, and will involve postal workers working Sundays, delivering parcels to offset job losses with a five-day USO possibly excluding Saturday deliveries. The union has admitted that 20,000 jobs will eventually go, saying that at least they will not be mandatory redundancies but voluntary. But what happens if Royal Mail does not get 20,000 voluntary redundancies? The CWU will not fight this, given its long record of renegeing on votes for strike action. The CWU’s London Division has warned that “these negotiations are going to be possibly the biggest since the ending of the second delivery and will mean major change[s].”

This means postal workers accepting “minimising letter decline,” “diversifying” deliveries and job losses.

Parcel volumes are up 64 percent according to Royal Mail’s financial results, increasing the already heavy workload faced by postal workers. Royal Mail has given massive amounts of money to shareholders. In the last seven years since privatisation, the hedge funds and other significant shareholders controlling Royal Mail have extracted over £1 billion in dividends and other remunerations.

Royal Mail announced in its financial result that it was losing £1 million a day due to the coronavirus crisis. It threatened that “change” would have to accelerate. Shortly after the release of the financial results, it announced that 2,000 managers would lose their jobs as part of £130 million savings.

While the CWU has boasted about its newfound love affair with Royal Mail, it has been extraordinarily silent on Royal Mail’s plans to increase profits for its shareholders. Despite a temporary reduction of dividends, Royal Mail has said “the opportunity remains to create more value for shareholders.” One such opportunity is to sell off its very profitable parcels company, GLS. This would create an enormous dividend for shareholders.

Royal Mail has continued with the selling of its prime infrastructure. In 2017, the company sold part of its land at Mount Pleasant in London to property developers Taylor Wimpey for £193 million. Just

recently, a large logistics warehouse used by Royal Mail has been purchased by an investment company at the cost of £13 million. The selling of what is the largest and busiest Parcelforce depot in the UK, handling around 20,000 parcels per day, is one indicator that far from safeguarding jobs, CWU talks with Royal Mail are a cover for attacks escalating behind the backs of postal workers.

At the start of the coronavirus crisis, the union called off a strike voted for by 94.5 percent of members on a 63.4 percent turnout. Without any consultation of its membership, Ward and Pullinger proposed a gentlemen’s agreement with Royal Mail and Boris Johnson’s Conservative government. In a “proposal to the company based on putting the interests of the nation first,” the CWU offered up Royal Mail workers as an “additional emergency service.” The CWU claimed this would end attacks on jobs and conditions and see the necessary safety measures implemented. Already, four postal workers have died of COVID-19, with many more sick at home or in hospital.

The fast pace of change means that it is later than postal workers think. They must reject the CWU’s mantra that they have the best interests of postal workers and are working for a better future. To take forward the struggle in defence of postal workers’ health and to oppose the onslaught on jobs and pay demands the formation of rank-and-file committees.

These committees must begin to coordinate a company-wide counter-offensive, rejecting the CWU’s call for collaboration with management, and taking the international class struggle as their starting point.

Against plans to carve up and hive off the company, the demand must be for Royal Mail to be nationalised without compensation and placed under workers’ control.



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