

Communication Workers Union trashes British Telecom strike ballot and agrees mass redundancies and closures

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The Communication Workers Union (CWU) has reached an agreement with British Telecom (BT) rubber stamping a restructuring program involving 13,000 job losses.

The programme also hives off 90 percent of its real estate as part of £1.5 billion cost cutting.

The CWU announced the agreement on July 8 without it even being put to a vote of its membership. The union defied a BT 97.9 percent vote in favour of striking of its 40,000 members at BT, its mobile phone subsidiary EE, and arms-length company Openreach, to defend jobs and conditions.

Following that consultative ballot in December, the CWU finally threatened to ballot for actual strike action in mid-May, within three weeks. UK wide strike action at the company would have been the first since 1987.

It instead entered into prolonged talks, before signing an agreement accepting the culling of jobs. This has left 170 engineers at Repayment Project Engineers (RPE) at Openreach to take selective strike action alone from February over the regrading of their roles, with inferior terms for new starts up including lower pay, sick pay and annual leave. They had voted 86 percent in favour of striking, the first anywhere in the BT Group since 1999.

The CWU claims the agreement with BT puts a pause on compulsory redundancies. This is a lie. The online technology publication, The Register, commented, “BT said it is going to try and push the *ejection seat button less regularly*—though that will come too late for thousands that have left since the change plan was enacted in 2018” (emphasis added). As a result of closures those staff not made redundant will face displacement and uncertainty.

The CWU boasting of a pay increase adds insult to injury. The consolidated pay rise for all CWU Represented Grades is not scheduled to take effect until April next year and no actual figure has been agreed.

CWU assistant general secretary for telecoms and financial services, Andy Kerr, tried to sell the agreement in a video posted on the union Facebook page on July 21. All he

succeeded in doing was to provoke a wave of anger.

Kerr boasted that the union “have got them in the room now”, claiming that BT company had changed its approach because it had accepted the services of the CWU as strikebreaker and industrial police force.

He asked, “So yes will buildings still close? Potentially. Will people move from Building A to Building B? Yes, but it should be within travel limits expected.”

He promises that the CWU would try to ensure that there would be BT sites “in every part of the geography of the UK.”

Kerr ended his remarks by stating, “The enemy is not within the CWU. The enemy is elsewhere.”

CWU members took to the Facebook page to disagree, condemning Kerr and the union leadership as company stooges, demanding to see the agreement, denouncing past sellouts and telling the union to answer the comments rather than delete critical posts.

More than 130 comments slamming the CWU include:

“I thought Andy Kerr was supposed to be our representative not our dictator! It’s pretty clear your decision that is being dictated to us is not supported by the workers.”

“Is this video satire? I’ve lost faith in the CWU. BT has won, the CWU haven’t. We need strong leadership not weak leadership.”

“The CWU elites were clearly afraid and have no intention of resorting to industrial action and BT knew that. Absolutely nothing has been achieved.”

“We stick together’ I think he means the CWU leaders and business. We are 97% together. The CWU are hopeless as far as I can see, we gave them the stick and they ran away and hid it.”

“Total waste of space no confidence in this so called union”

BT workers pointed to the fact that their jobs and sites had not been spared. A worker with 33 years of service took

compulsory redundancy rather than face a daily 2.5 hour commute each way to work. Others pointed to the pay increase being pie in the sky, asking what happened to the uplift for 2020/21.

In the face of this rout of the CWU and revolt by the membership, the pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) have offered token criticisms, but always within the framework of upholding the authority of the union.

In its article “Revolt over BT deal offers so little” the SWP presented the agreement as poor, rather than proof that the CWU was functioning as corporate partners of the company to snuff out opposition. It doesn’t cite any comment from rank-and-file workers, only those of local union reps, and quotes the call for CWU General Secretary Dave Ward “to intervene.”

As ever the SWP try to promote one faction of the union bureaucracy over the other, while concealing the treacherous role they all play collectively.

Ward and the CWU bureaucracy reneged on a 97 percent strike mandate last October at Royal Mail by its 110,000 members against further restructuring. It appealed instead to key shareholders, offering to demonstrate how to make the privatised company “a very successful business.” It called for management to return to the Four Pillars agreement of 2018, with Deputy General Secretary Terry Pullinger stating, “Everything was supposed to be done together.”

The agreement included the introduction of inferior pensions, a reduction in the working week through unpaid meals breaks, and boosting productivity through reconfiguration of delivery routes, new duty patterns and increased use of technology to monitor performance. Throughout last year workplace stoppages by postal workers were all wildcat actions over the spread of Covid-19 infections and deaths at depots, such was the collusion between the CWU and Royal Mail over unsafe working conditions.

The CWU has repeatedly stalled any action against the restructuring plan, “Better Workplace Programme,” since BT announced it back in 2019, which threatened to cut 300 sites to 30 and slash its 100,000 strong workforce by over ten percent.

The *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) warned that no fightback could be entrusted to the CWU, with an unbroken record of betrayal stretching back to privatisation in 1982—agreed to by its forerunner, the National Communications Union, sacrificing the jobs of one third of the workforce.

The CWU enabled BT to boost its profits by over £1 billion in the year up to 2020, agreeing to an inferior pension scheme, saving £100 million annually and increasing the

retirement age from 60 to 65, increased employee contributions, and replacing the final salary scheme with a lower career average.

The threat of industrial action was used by the CWU only as a bargaining chip with BT to ensure that it was invited back into the boardroom. The WSWS drew attention to Kerr’s statement that the company was risking the industrial peace ensured by the union over three decades of restructuring and concessions and pledging, “The CWU is committed to work with the company to achieve everything it wants without creating a needless industrial relations and staff morale crisis.”

BT workers join a lengthening list of workers whose struggles, particularly those in relation to fire and rehire, have been betrayed by unions, including the CWU, the GMB at British Gas and Unite at Go North West and in its ongoing attempt to enforce a filthy concessions agreement at JDE.

These corrupt and moribund organisations have collectively presided over four decades of the suppression of the class struggle, or more correctly ensured its entirely one-sided character.

The pandemic and the wave of corporate restructuring is provoking working class opposition globally, not just to corporations and governments but directed against the corporate syndicates that the trade unions have become.

The working class needs new forms of organisations which are militant, democratic and fight for social equality against the dictates of capital enforced by its agents in the labour and trade union bureaucracy. This is the perspective fought for by the International Committee in the call for the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees. We urge BT workers and all workers in the UK to study our statement and build a labour movement worthy of the name, across national borders and in a fight for socialism.



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