

UK Post Office workers to stage national strike on May 3 against government pay restraint

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Post Office workers are to take national strike action May 3, in opposition to pay restraint imposed in line with the public sector policy dictated by the Johnson government.

The one-day stoppage will close 114 Crown Post Offices (those run directly by the Post Office) around the country and there will be no cash deliveries or collections from 11,500 sub-post offices. The action involves over 1,000 workers including counter staff as well as clerical, administration and call centre workers.

Members of the Communication Workers Union (CWU) voted in March by a 97.3 percent majority for strike action in a ballot turnout of 70 percent. They have rejected a miserly 2.5 percent pay rise, offered as inflation climbs to a 30-year high of 6 percent CPI and 9 percent RPI.

The proposed two-year deal includes the pay freeze for last year and a lump sum of £250 in addition to the 2.5 percent from April this year.

The determination of postal workers to fight back is in sharp contrast to the CWU. While the union is making token noises about the insulting pay offer, its efforts have been directed towards preventing a struggle from taking place.

Andy Furey, CWU Assistant General Secretary, told the *Independent*, “Despite this union’s best attempts to avoid strike action, the Post Office has displayed no interest whatsoever in meaningful negotiations.”

The union has confined itself to evasive references to a decent and fair agreement rather than specify a demand in line with inflation and which compensates for last year’s pay freeze.

Now that a national strike is taking place the CWU is seeking to head off a confrontation with the

government and drive a wedge between postal workers and millions of public sector workers suffering widespread austerity.

In a press release Furey states in reference to the Post Office, “They have told us that they’re freezing pay in keeping with official government and public-sector pay policy... But that’s an outrageous and dishonest excuse as the government’s austerity measures do not apply to the Post Office and it should be borne in mind that our members worked throughout the pandemic to provide essential services to the Great British public.”

He added that “the further irony here is that our members are always being told by senior management that they are a commercial operation and required to make a profit – yet the Post Office is a profitable concern – profits made by the hard work and dedication and skill of our members.”

Health workers, teachers, refuse workers and millions of other public sector workers have served on the frontline of the pandemic in which their safety was disregarded only to be rewarded with below inflation deals. The divisive approach of the CWU must be rejected in favour of a unified fightback.

Furey argues for accepting the entire framework of cost cutting and restructuring in the name of profitability on the false pretence that workers will get their “fair share” rather than suffer stepped-up exploitation.

The state-owned Post Office was separated off from Royal Mail when the latter was privatised back in 2012, splitting the cashier and retail operations from the letter and parcel delivery service. Since then, the number of Crown Post Offices has been reduced from 373 by more than two-thirds, to 114. Fully 99 percent of Post

Offices are run by an independent postmaster, or what is described as a larger franchise partner, i.e., major retail chains.

The government subsidy has been reduced from £210 million in 2012-13 to £50 million annually, according to a *Financial Times* article last August, “in the drive to make the Post Office commercially viable.” Post Office CEO Nick Read explained that while the plan to remove all government subsidy, except for rural branches, by 2022 has been postponed, it was still intended to be achieved by 2025-6.

Read outlined plans to introduce self-service kiosks in 2,000 to 3,000 branches following the example of Post Canada. He admitted this would be at the expense of jobs. Read also referred to a move into the pick-up and drop-off market and for the Post Office to act as an outreach for banks that have deserted the high streets in favour of online services. The Post Office has entered into agreements with Amazon and DPD in relation to parcel deliveries, rather than their exclusive handling by Royal Mail.

The sole focus of the Post Office is to maximise profits as the government subsidy is stripped out. This can only further undermine the social obligations it is formally committed to in providing an accessible service to the elderly and most vulnerable, and will be done at the expense of workers’ jobs, pay and terms and conditions.

The Post Office has been at the centre of a massive frame-up of postal workers through the Horizon scandal. Hundreds of sub-postmasters and postmistresses were wrongfully convicted to cover up the defective Horizon IT auditing system designed and installed by Japanese company Fujitsu. This was introduced across the Post Office network in 1999 at the cost of £1 billion. The defects in the IT system showed false shortfalls in branch accounts and led to 736 unsafe convictions for offences ranging from false accounting, theft and fraud between 2000 and 2014, resulting in some prison sentences.

This was only brought to light due to the legal campaign by those wrongfully convicted and their supporters, spanning a 20-year period against bitter resistance from the Post Office. At the end of 2019 the Post Office finally agreed to pay damages to 555 claimants in civil cases. Last April the Court of Appeal quashed in a single ruling the convictions against 39

postmasters, part of a total of 72 such rulings to date, with many more expected to go to court. The bill of compensation for the victims of injustice meted out by the Post Office is estimated to be £1 billion.

One of the “Post Office 39” who had their convictions overturned is Seema Misra, a mother who was eight weeks pregnant with her second child when she was sentenced in 2010 for theft and false accounting, spending four months in prison, and ordered to pay £40,000 in compensation to the Post Office. Misra stated, “The Post Office was like a mafia. They have blood on their hands. We live in a developed country, how can we let these criminals roam around freely?”

There is widespread anger among postal workers over the fact that nobody in authority at the Post Office or Fujitsu has faced criminal prosecution for what has been described as the most “widespread miscarriage of justice” in recent UK history. Both parties have been shown to have withheld evidence regarding the faulty IT system. Paula Vennells, who oversaw the cover-up and persecution of sub-postmasters, is estimated to have raked in £5 million in pay and bonuses during her time as managing director and later chief executive of the Post Office before stepping down in 2019.

Post Office workers should reject the CWU’s argument that their fight should be conducted separately from those in the public sector facing austerity. The claim that a pay rise can be achieved by accepting the pro-business framework for the Post Office of further restructuring to hike up profits is bogus.

We encourage Post Office workers to read the Socialist Equality Party statement, “The working class must mobilise to bring down the Johnson government.” This outlines a strategy to mobilise the working class independently of the Labour Party and trade unions, which act as accomplices of the government and the employers as they demand increased exploitation and social looting in the interests of the corporate and financial elite.



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