

Post Office workers mount one-day UK-wide pay strike

Tony Robson
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Post Office workers around the UK walked out in a 24 hour strike today against an insulting pay offer by the state-owned postal service significantly below the spiralling rate of inflation, running at a 30 year high of 7 percent CPI and 9 percent RPI.

Members of the Communication Workers Union (CWU) voted for strike action in March by a majority of 97 percent, in opposition to a miserly 2 percent rise from April this year plus a £250 lump sum. This comes after the pay freeze imposed last year.

Industrial action was centred on the 114 Crown Offices (those directly operated by the Post Office) around the country and there were expected to be no cash deliveries or collections from 11,500 sub-post offices run by independent postmasters or under franchise by major retailers. An estimated 1,700 Post Office employees participated including counter staff, clerical, administration and call centre workers.

Picket lines were set-up outside Crown Post offices and Post Office cash centres in cities and towns across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The turnout on the picket lines did not match the depth of support for the strike shown in the ballot.

The CWU first attempted to stymie opposition and then to isolate the dispute. Even under circumstances in which the union has overseen a real term decline in their members' pay, the union has been apologetic about the industrial action.

Andy Furey, CWU Assistant General Secretary, said, "This is not an issue of affordability. This is about power play from a management that is needlessly antagonising its key worker employees."

The average salary for Post Office Postal Assistants is less than £24,000 according to the CWU. The proposed increase would amount to 6-pence-an-hour when factoring in the government hike in employee National

Insurance contributions last month.

For all the CWU's rhetoric about the "exceptionally poor" pay offer, the union cannot even raise itself to the level of demanding a pay increase indexed to inflation as a bare minimum. It has yet to announce any further dates for action despite the huge strike mandate.

While the CWU talks about establishing fair treatment for its members in the Post Office as key workers, it has sought to segregate their fight from the millions of National Health Service (NHS) and local council workers and teachers who have likewise served on the frontline of the pandemic and been rewarded with below-inflation pay deals. Furey has stressed that the Post Office, unlike NHS and council employers, is not bound by public sector pay "restraint", rather than link the postal workers' fight to the necessary struggle against the wider austerity policy of the Johnson government.

CWU leaders sat on opposition to the pay freeze last year and are only making a case for a raise now on the basis that it is affordable for the company thanks to its profitability. They do so to promote an ongoing partnership with management over further restructuring operations at the expense of jobs and conditions.

The CWU has been fully integrated into this year's long process, including at Royal Mail Group (RMG), the letter and parcel delivery service separated from the Post Office and privatised 10 years ago.

In 2020, the union called off national strike action by 111,000 postal workers at Royal Mail, offering them up to the Johnson government as an additional emergency service during the pandemic as part of an industrial truce enforced by all the trade unions. Across the country, wildcat strike action became the only means through which postal workers could demand a safe workplace as outbreaks of COVID infections and in

some cases deaths were reported.

With mass strike action prevented, the profits of Royal Mail quadrupled in the financial year up to March 2021 as a result of lockdowns and the resort to online shopping, lifting pre-tax profits to £726 million from £180 million the year previous. The company profitability so cherished by the CWU has been brought about through its fulfilling the role of an industrial police force against workers' interests.

The pandemic has continued to take a heavy toll on postal workers. Over the Christmas period last year, Royal Mail reported staff absences at a rate of more than one in eight of its workforce, either sick or self-isolating as the Omicron variant took hold.

CWU General Secretary Dave Ward has personally overseen the union's corporatist agenda and its dire consequences for postal workers, making his presence at the Glasgow cash centre picket line, bringing "solidarity", an affront.

The union is currently stalling a strike ballot of 115,000 Royal Mail workers over this year's pay deal, scheduled for talks with management this week. Royal Mail has already made clear the new benchmark of exploitation demanded, tabling what it has packaged as a 5.5 percent offer.

Even this below-inflation figure is not what it claims. It consists of just a 2 percent basic increase, with a further 1.5 percent based on the introduction of compulsory Sunday working to compete with Amazon and DPD and the following concessions: the scrapping of 32 allowances and supplements, reduction in sick pay and all new recruits to be placed on inferior pay and conditions. The missing 2 percent is a "above and beyond" bonus based on workers hitting productivity targets.

A genuine struggle can only be waged by forging the unity of workers across sectional divisions, and in irreconcilable opposition to the demand of the government and the employers that they sacrifice their interests for company profits. The CWU is not a vehicle for such a struggle but an obstacle, functioning as an appendage of management. Postal workers in the Post Office and Royal Mail can overcome this by establishing rank-and-file committees, democratic organisations of workers' struggle, to wage a fight for a genuine pay increase and against corporate "restructuring".



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