UK: BT facing first national strike in 35 years as 40,000 telecoms workers ballot over pay

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BT Group, the UK telecoms giant, is facing a national strike over pay by 40,000 frontline staff across BT and its subsidiaries, Openreach and EE. The Communication Workers Union (CWU) will begin balloting from June 15.

BT announced its decision to impose a pay award for this year of between 3 and 8 percent for 58,000 staff, on April 7. This was after it brought an abrupt end to any further negotiations with the CWU.

The company hailed its pay award as the best in 20 years, but it's a de facto pay cut, deeper now than it was just over a month ago. Since then, the CPI rate of inflation has climbed from 7 to 9 percent and the RPI rate (including housing costs) has risen from 9 to 11.1 percent.

The company recorded £1.3 billion in profits last year but has unilaterally imposed a substandard pay award. The CWU is framing its strike mandate call around convincing management to return to negotiations, rather than a full mobilisation of telecom workers to defend their rights and assert the demand for a genuine pay increase.

BT feels it can act with impunity. It has the measure of the CWU based upon its record of collusion with the company. Last year the CWU agreed to a pay freeze. Workers received only a £1,000 lump sum, with pledges of a pay rise this year. Nothing remains of these promises of jam tomorrow based on the union's collaboration with management.

The imposition of a pay freeze was part of the CWU's demobilisation of the fight against restructuring which targeted 13,000 jobs. In December 2020, a consultation ballot recorded a strike mandate of 97.9 percent. Instead of moving to a full strike ballot as pledged, the CWU negotiated with BT behind the back of its members, rubber stamping an agreement for the closure of offices around the country. CWU Assistant General Secretary for Telecoms & Financial Services (TFS) Andy Kerr tried to justify this sell-out in a video posted July 21, 2021 on the union's Facebook group—but his excuses were widely ridiculed, with telecoms workers describing the union as company stooges.

While BT workers are looking to make a stand, the union is manoeuvring with management. The CWU is concerned it has been bypassed as a junior partner of BT in keeping a lid on workers' opposition.

As the CWU stated, "At the heart of the dispute, after all, is the company's abandonment of time-honoured negotiating protocols based on partnership and consent that have underpinned decades of industrial peace."

That the CWU's pay demand is for 10 percent is solely down to the initiative of engineers, call centre and shop workers. The CWU TFS formally acknowledged the demand but has dropped any reference to it in the preparations to ballot for strike action.

In fact, Kerr warned against a "summer of discontent" while trying to falsely align himself with the oppositional mood of telecom workers claiming it is time for the company to put its people before profit.

This is empty rhetoric proven by his own comments. After describing how BT Group was preparing to pay out 60 percent of its profits to shareholders, Kerr stated, "If BT reduced the 7.7 pence per share dividend they are planning to give shareholders by between 0.4 and 0.5 pence, and gave that money instead to those who generate the profits, that would be enough to settle a deal I'm confident members would find acceptable."

BT workers' determination to fight the company's pay cut was shown on May 25, when 11,500 members attended the CWU's online meeting to launch the

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countdown for a ballot on strike action.

Kerr was joined at the meeting by CWU General Secretary Dave Ward and CWU President Karen Rose. A stream of comments came through declaring “Yes” to industrial action. Rose tried to bat off questions over the delay by the CWU in organising a strike ballot. The CWU president went through a lengthy explanation of why the ballot had to be postal and that the union was adhering to the letter of anti-strike laws.

Even as the CWU finally got round to balloting for the strike, the so-called “left” Dave Ward set out to dampen militant opposition in the most condescending manner. He said the CWU were running a “proper dispute” and that the strike ballot was “not about putting your head down and running at them”. The CWU would also pursue dialogue to convince the big shareholders, he explained.

On the CWU’s Facebook page where a video of the online meeting was posted, telecom workers demanded to know the union’s pay demand in relation to the strike. For all their bluster about the cost-of-living crisis, none of the three CWU leaders addressed this central issue in their remarks to the meeting. The bitter experience of last year’s sell-out has not been forgotten, as shown by a number of the comments. In relation to the CWU jettisoning the strike ballot after an emphatic majority in the consultative ballot, one worker added, “The ballot showed how we felt. Why did the union not come back and ballot for strike? Why did they roll over and accept zero %? Why did they not ballot about site closures?”

The highly paid executives of the CWU fear any strike action could serve as a focal point for pent up opposition against rampant exploitation and intolerable working conditions demanded in the name of maximising profits.

The CWU is sitting on the potential for a far wider counter-offensive across the telecommunications and postal network among its 200,000 members.

Following a national strike on May 3 by its membership across the Post Office against a paltry 2 percent pay offer and £250 lump sum for this year, the CWU is downscaling the action. Its latest revised offer is just 2.5 percent and a £500 lump sum. The next stoppage will be on June 4 involving only counter staff at 114 Crown Offices across the UK. Those in the supply chain, engaged in cash collections and deliveries, and other administration staff, are being called out separately on June 6.

At Royal Mail, the CWU is stifling strike action by around 100,000 postal workers after the company tabled a pay offer of just 5.5 percent. This involves a mere 2 percent core pay rise with the remaining 3.5 percent conditional on productivity strings and concessions, including compulsory Sunday working and reduced sick pay and allowances. Rather than ballot for strike action against the insulting pay offer and attack on historic rights won in past struggles, the CWU has entered a four-week Dispute Resolution Process. Talks are set to continue with management to the end of next week.

Telecom workers across BT, Openreach and EE should return a massive strike vote in the ballot, but no confidence can be extended to the CWU. Far from challenging the false claim by the company that it cannot afford more, the CWU is silently dropping the 10 percent demand. Kerr’s comments show it will not fight for redistribution of a single penny in share dividends to be paid out during BT’s next profit windfall.

The company’s generous “offer” —which it has imposed—will be funded by setting aside £90 million, a figure that is overshadowed by the £761 million to be handed to shareholders.

Rank-and-file committees formed by workers are needed across BT to take the dispute out of the hands of the CWU. Such democratically run committees must fight for an uplift on the 10 percent mandate in line with rising inflation and draw up broader demands for the defence of conditions. Such committees can reach out to Post Office and Royal Mail workers against the artificial divisions upheld by the CWU as it pursues back room deals with management and hawks itself at shareholder meetings.

This is the means through which telecoms and postal workers can forge their class unity and mobilise their social strength to defend their living standards against the corporate elite and the Johnson government.

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