

UK Royal Mail workers ballot for national strike action against imposition of 2 percent pay award

Tony Robson
22 June 2022

The Communication Workers Union (CWU) has announced it will ballot 115,000 postal workers for national strike action against the imposition of a 2 percent pay award for this year by the highly profitable Royal Mail Group. The ballot will open on June 28 with results to be announced on July 19.

The privatised postal company has acted unilaterally in foisting what amounts to a massive pay cut on its workforce with inflation currently standing at 11.7 percent. This follows in the footsteps of BT Group, the UK telecommunications giant, which broke off negotiations with the CWU in early April, declaring that a pay increase of between 3 and 8 percent for 58,000 frontline workers was its final offer.

The CWU opened a strike ballot on June 15 of its 40,000 members across the BT Group and Openreach and EE subsidiaries. It is shaping up to be the first national strike action since 1987 at the company which was formally British Telecom. The CWU agreed a pay freeze for last year and sabotaged national strike action against the mass closure of BT centres with its delay in balloting coming in for criticism by telecommunication workers.

CWU Assistant General Secretary (Postal) Terry Pullinger was summoned to a meeting on Wednesday of last week with Royal Mail's chief executive and HR director in a coffee shop in London. They announced a staggeringly low 2 percent pay award would be implemented by executive decision. Pullinger's response was to caution management that its pay diktat risked provoking "the biggest Yes vote this union has ever had" in a strike ballot.

The CWU's corporatist partnership with Royal Mail has allowed it to proceed in such a dictatorial manner.

Royal Mail had already declared its hand in imposing a below inflation pay award while demanding sweeping restructuring of terms and conditions months ago.

The response of the CWU at its annual conference in April was to declare it would trigger the Dispute Resolution Process in early May, a four-week procedure through which the union and company work to avert strike action through talks.

Royal Mail had originally tabled a package of 5.5 percent which comprised a mere 2 percent pay increase with the additional 1.5 percent contingent on accepting compulsory Sunday working, a reduction in sick pay and allowances, flexible working with no set finishing times or overtime, and a two-tier workforce with new starters on lower pay and conditions. The remaining 2 percent was dependent on additional productivity targets.

As far as the CWU is concerned, this charter for sweatshop labour is negotiable. It argued only that the pay award should be dealt with separately from the targeting of postal workers' past gains and emphasised that it is committed to further negotiations over productivity and revisions through the Pathway to Change.

The union has not even demanded the company lift its de facto pay cut before further negotiations proceed and is in continued talks over demands for productivity increases and concessions.

Pullinger claimed the union would accept no lectures from the company over pay, after it was revealed that Royal Mail CEO Simon Thompson had awarded himself a £143,000 bonus, bringing his annual package to around £753,000 for 2021-22.

However, the union's supposed commitment to a cost-

of-living increase for workers in the face of this corporate looting does not even run to specifying a pay demand. Pullinger emphasised that even in the event of a strike mandate, the CWU would not be committed to action. He said that after ballot results are known, “At that point, depending on where we are, we will make a decision as whether we need to take industrial action, and if there has been no movement that is exactly what we will be recommending.”

Royal Mail’s renewed offensive has been made possible by the CWU’s deepening collusion with the company during the pandemic.

In 2020, the union called off national strike action by Royal Mail postal workers, offering them up to the Johnson government as an additional emergency service to assist with the pandemic response through the delivery of testing kits.

The CWU and all the unions agreed an industrial truce with the government in 2020-21 which placed profits over lives and enabled Royal Mail to take its place as one of the pandemic profiteers.

With mass strike action prevented, the profits of Royal Mail quadrupled in the financial year up to March 2021. Lockdowns and the resort to online shopping lifted its pre-tax profits to £726 million from £180 million the year previous.

While the CWU was preaching national unity and the company was raking in record profits, Royal Mail offices were hit by COVID outbreaks which claimed lives. The level of union complicity led to a string of unofficial walkouts across the country as postal workers took safety matters into their own hands.

The CWU still presents Royal Mail Group as a “great public service” while handing out £600 million to shareholders since July this year. The introduction of compulsory Sunday work and total labour flexibility is especially aimed at placing its parcel delivery operations on competitive terms with the likes of Amazon, with sweatshop pay, terms and conditions to match.

As in every sector in which key battalions of workers are being drawn into battle the mobilisation of around 200,000 postal and telecommunication workers needs to proceed through the fight to establish rank-and-file committees. This fight must be co-ordinated by breaking down sectional barriers and uniting postal workers with their allies at the government-owned Post

Office and beyond.

Around 1,000 Post Office workers took national strike action on May 3 against a paltry 2 percent pay offer and £250 lump sum for this year, but the CWU is downscaling the action. The latest revised offer is just 2.5 percent and a £500 lump sum. Further national stoppages have involved a retreat from unified action. Counter staff at 114 Crown Offices across the UK took strike action on June 4 and those involved in the Post Office supply chain engaged in cash collections and deliveries struck on June 6.

The Post Office has used private delivery company G4S as a strike breaking force during the stoppages, but the CWU has buried any news of this attack. Andy Furey, CWU National Officer for the Post Office, commented to CWU News, “Taken together with their various other ‘dispute-mitigation’ measures, it’s costing more for them to fight us than it would to settle this pay dispute.”

Contrary to the claims of the right-wing media the “Summer of Discontent” is not the result of “union barons” but a threatened movement from below with the former serving as a bulwark against such a development. The working class is striving towards a collective struggle and for a reckoning with the most right-wing and corrupt government in British history as part of a renewed upsurge of the international working class.

Postal and telecommunication workers should mobilise alongside rail workers national strike action against the pay freeze, mass job cuts and a scorched earth policy against long established rights. This is threatened by a legal battering ram against strike action and surrender terms offered by the RMT backed by the Trades Union Congress and the Labour Party which would leave intact the Johnson government’s reprivatisation agenda.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact