

40,000 BT workers in UK vote to strike, but Communication Workers Union pledges no “knee jerk reaction”

Robert Stevens
1 July 2022

Thousands of BT telecoms and call centre staff could strike within weeks. On June 15, the Communication Workers Union (CWU) balloted workers in three categories—BT, Openreach and EE subsidiaries—across the BT group.

If the strike goes ahead it will be the first national stoppage of BT workers in 35 years. That strike took place in 1987, three years after the former public utility was privatised by the Thatcher government.

30,000 of the company’s Openreach engineers voted by 95.8 percent to strike on a 74 percent turnout and staff in the 10,000-strong BT department (including 9,000 call centre workers) voted to strike by 91.5 percent on a 58.2 percent turnout. Workers in EE, the smallest number voting in the ballot, supported strikes by a majority of 95 percent but on a 49.7 percent turnout—falling just eight votes short of meeting the threshold required for a legal stoppage under anti-strike laws.

The vote reflects anger among workers brewing for months. In March, the CWU rejected a substantially below inflation pay offer from BT of £1,200. BT then announced April 7 that it was awarding a revised proposal of £1,500 to 58,000 frontline workers, from the start of that month, stating that it had concluded negotiations with the CWU and effectively imposing the deal. Touted as the highest pay rise awarded in 20 years, the deal was between 3 and 8 percent depending on base salary. The CWU calculated that the imposed deal was worth only around 4.8 percent overall.

By March, RPI inflation was already at 9 percent, rising to 11.1 percent in April before reaching nearly 12 percent last month. The below-inflation diktat was imposed by a company posting annual profits this year of £1.3 billion, while gifting £700 million to its shareholders.

A demand for a 10 percent increase arose independently

from engineers, call centre and shop workers. Forced to call a ballot, the CWU at that stage also adopted the 10 percent demand.

The role of the unions as organisations dedicated to the suppression of the class struggle is clear in the refusal of the CWU bureaucracy to mount any strike action in a dispute now into its fifth month.

Its response to this week’s massive mandate for strikes was to announce a further delay. The CWU pleaded with BT management to re-enter talks, with General Secretary Dave Ward saying the strike vote would not see a “knee jerk reaction from the union”. It will give BT management until the *end of next week* to enter talks and see if “they’re willing to set aside the imposition of pay and come to the table with a significantly improved offer.” Only then will a date for strikes be named, giving BT a further seven days’ notice required by law.

The main issue riling the CWU was that BT decided to impose its pay cut without the involvement of a union bureaucracy that has proven itself a pliant tool of management in dispute after dispute. Speaking after the strike vote, Deputy General Secretary Andy Kerr said that while BT’s pay offer “was not enough, really the biggest issue was the imposition of it.”

The unions’ first role is to delay calling any strikes, utilising endless consultative ballots and negotiations aimed at demoralising workers, staggering industrial action and preventing a unified movement of the working class. Where this is not possible, they sanction one or a few days of strikes as a means of dissipating workers’ anger.

Were every section of workers currently in dispute—whether they have voted to strike, are being or due to be balloted—to be mobilised, the action would involve around 3 million workers. Yet such is the

suppression of struggles by the unions that not a single major strike took place in Britain this week.

After 40,000 rail workers held three 24-hour strikes last week, and 10,000 London Underground workers struck for a day, the Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT), resumed talks with Network Rail Thursday. In language similar to the CWU, RMT senior assistant general secretary, Eddie Dempsey, when asked if the union would sanction more strikes this month, replied, "We've told people we're not in any rush... We don't take these steps lightly. We're in no rush to run into the boardroom and name further action."

The RMT is seeking a deal based on what would be a real terms pay cut of just 7 percent and a token commitment to "no compulsory redundancies" by the company. The union went into talks despite Network Rail launching a Section 188 consultation process, beginning July 1, over redundancies. The company is seeking to shed more than 1,500 jobs as part of its cost-cutting agenda.

Sky News noted on the resumption of talks that "reforms will inevitably require redundancies, but [that Network Rail] believes 95% of these can be achieved through a voluntary process." This is entirely compatible with the RMT's long-standing playbook for allowing jobs to be negotiated away, provided this is done on a "voluntary" basis. The union "is understood to have prepared its own proposals on modernisation and cost cutting, including more than £200m of potential savings, secured in part by ending a reliance on sub-contractors."

The mood of workers to fight means that as soon as the unions move to sabotage one dispute, another breaks out. This week around 2,400 managers across more than 1,000 delivery offices in Britain (86 percent in favour) and Northern Ireland (89 percent) voted to strike against job losses. The CWU is also balloting 115,000 postal workers for industrial action against the imposition of a 2 percent pay award this year by Royal Mail Group. Results will be announced July 19.

Seven hundred BA ground staff at Heathrow Airport voted to strike last month. Their pay was slashed by 10 percent during the pandemic. If the dispute is not ended by the GMB and Unite unions, strikes could take place as early as July 8.

In education, hundreds of thousands of teachers are demanding a pay increase. The National Education Union and National Union of Schoolmasters-Union of Women Teachers have called no action, with the largest, the NEU, stating that it may hold a strike ballot in the autumn but

only after teachers are forced to vote in another consultative ballot.

The Socialist Equality Party statement, "Lessons of the British rail strikes" explained, "Conditions are emerging for a general strike to bring down the Johnson government and bring an end to pay cuts and deepening social inequality. But this means a political fight against the sabotage of the TUC and Labour who are de facto partners with the Tories."

The strikes threatened in the UK are part of a global upsurge in the class struggle, expressed in a wave of industrial action including general strikes in several European countries. On Friday, the *Daily Mail* led its online edition with the headline, "Prepare for 'Stay at Home Summer'."

It noted that Ryanair staff are striking this week at the airline's Spanish bases, hitting 10 airports. EasyJet cabin crew in Spain, seeking a 40 percent hike in basic pay, are to hold nine days of strikes this month. The Ryanair and EasyJet workers are striking in defiance of the company and Spain's Socialist Party (PSOE)-Podemos government. It cracked down on a three-day, European-wide Ryanair cabin crew strike last week by imposing draconian minimum services, making it illegal for most staff to strike.

The *Mail's* report also lists, "Paris Charles De Gaulle: strikes this weekend; Orly Airport: strikes this weekend; Adolfo Suarez Madrid-Barajas: Ryanair staff strike this weekend; Ibiza Airport: Ryanair staff strike this weekend; Leonard Da Vinci Int. Airport: Disruption caused by French ATC strike...; Copenhagen Airport: chaos if SAS airline staff vote to strike this week; Oslo Airport: chaos if SAS airline staff vote to strike this week; Stockholm Arlanda: chaos if SAS airline staff vote to strike this week."



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact