

UK Post Office workers in third round of national strikes against de facto pay cut

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Around 1,500 Post Office workers at 114 Crown Post Offices across the UK staged a third round of strike action on Monday against a derisory 3 percent pay offer and a £500 lump sum payment.

The members of the Communications Workers Union (CWU) remain committed to overturning the de facto pay cut, coming on top of a pay freeze last year, with inflation now running at 11.7 percent RPI.

The profits of the government-operated postal service more than halved from its pre-pandemic levels but it still made £35 million in 2020/1. Those on the front line who have kept the service operating throughout the emergency health crisis are not prepared to accept poverty pay in return.

Workers voted by 97 percent in March for strike action against an original offer of 2 percent with a £250 lump sum. With inflation rising by more than 2 percentage points in the interim, the size of the de facto pay cut has effectively grown.

In response to management's ruthless suppression of wages the CWU has scaled down industrial action. The first national strike on May 3 involved counter staff at the Crown Offices, as well as cash and valuables in transit (CViT) workers and those in administration support responsible for the collection and delivery of cash, valuables and supplies to 11,500 sub-post offices.

Since then, the CWU has called the 3,500 workers out separately on June 4 and 6. Its divisive approach continues this week with the stoppage at the Crown Post Offices on Monday to be followed by Supply Chain and Admin on Thursday.

From the start of the dispute, the CWU has sought a settlement which avoids a confrontation with the Johnson government's austerity program and is in line with its business model for extracting greater profits from the public service.

The union argued for the Post Office to be made an exception from the pay restraint imposed on millions in the public sector, rather than encouraging a joint struggle to defeat the criminal disregard for all key workers.

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 due to its profitability. They do so to promote an ongoing partnership with management over further restructuring operations at the expense of jobs and conditions.

This has only served to isolate Post Office workers from their natural allies and embolden management to press ahead.

Andy Furey, CWU National Officer, explained the lengths the union had gone to in seeking to end the dispute: "After the first two actions in May and June, we agreed to talks with Post Office leaders last week and, as a gesture of good faith we decided to pause further strikes in the genuine hope that a resolution could be found through negotiation.

"But, as reported yesterday their pay position only increased by a half of a per cent and this frankly insulting proposal was clearly not a serious attempt on the part of the management to find an agreed settlement. Not only did they fail to make an acceptable offer for 2022/23, they still failed to offer any backpay for the whole of the 2021/22 financial year—during which no pay offer was made by them at all."

Furey has now called on the Post Office "stop the spin and get serious about pay". But management is serious: it is committed to holding down wages and has been prepared to organise a strikebreaking operation by using private delivery firm G4S. While the CWU has described this move as "down right wrong", it has downplayed it in its reporting, under conditions in

which the government is drawing up plans for even tighter anti-strike legislation, including the use of agency staff as scab labour, in response to the national rail strike.

Downscaling the Post Office dispute is of piece with the CWU's role in forestalling strike action among its over 150,000 members across the privatised telecommunications and postal services—BT Group and Royal Mail Group.

On June 30, around 40,000 telecommunication workers at BT and its subsidiary Openreach voted for the first national strike action at the company since 1987, handing the CWU a mandate of over 90 percent. The union has postponed naming any strike dates and called on BT to re-enter talks even though it unilaterally imposed a pay deal worth 4.8 percent back in April. The UK telecoms giant has set aside £90 million for the pay settlement in contrast to the £761 million it is to hand out to shareholders.

The main concern of the CWU is that it has been bypassed as company enforcer. Last year it signed up to management's plan for site closures and the axing of 13,000 jobs. This was after it jettisoned a national strike ballot following a consultative vote which returned an overwhelming majority in favour. The union also agreed a pay freeze on the promise of jam tomorrow. It continues to avoid any reference to the 10 percent demand drawn up by its membership as it begs the company to present a revised offer to avert strike action.

At Royal Mail the result of a ballot for national strike action of 115,000 CWU members is due to be announced on July 19 after a 2 percent pay deal was unilaterally imposed by management last month. The company made clear as far back as April that this paltry amount was all it was prepared to concede, having made an original offer of 5.5 percent conditional on a raft of concessions and productivity strings.

The CWU has not outlined any pay demand and while it has called for a no-strings pay award, the union has made clear it is open to discussing management's desired sweatshop conditions in separate negotiations. These include 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.

In 2020, the CWU overturned a mandate for national strike action to work with Royal Mail and the government "in the interests of the nation", keeping postal on the job in unsafe conditions lacking adequate protection from COVID-19. This enabled the company to quadruple its profits and join the ranks of the pandemic profiteers.

In the hands of the union bureaucracy the "Summer of Discontent" which ought to herald a much-needed working-class fightback will become a summer of suppressed industrial action.

The CWU has responded to ballots for strikes by seeking to demobilise its members, appealing to the employers to avert industrial action with revised pay settlements at minimum cost to their profits. It does so to re-establish itself as trusted partner in enforcing new benchmarks of exploitation.

It has explicitly disavowed any broader struggle. At the CWU National Conference, General Secretary Dave Ward stated that his called for "new deal" for workers is not about the "politics of the country" or "capitalism".

Attempts to derail strike action are combined with efforts to present the bitterly hostile Labour Party as an ally of workers in struggle. Ward has made written appeals for Labour MPs to visit picket lines after the vast majority obeyed party leader Starmer's edict to keep away from rail strike pickets last month.

The CWU is playing its part in averting collective strike action by hundreds of thousands if not millions of workers who could bring their social power to bear in a fight to bring down the Tory government.

A network of rank-and-file committees should be established to overcome the divisions maintained by the CWU across the Post Office, BT and Royal Mail, with a cost-of-living pay increase demand drawn up directly targeting the ill-gotten gains of the corporate elite. This should be combined with the fight for socialist policies which take the basic utilities out of the hands of private ownership for profit and place them under workers' control.



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