

UK: 40,000 BT telecoms workers to strike as 115,000 postal workers vote for action at Royal Mail

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More than 40,000 workers at UK telecoms giant BT Group are set to strike on July 29 and August 1 against a below inflation pay award for this year. Following the first national rail strike in 25 years last month, the BT action will be the first company-wide strike since 1987—three years after its privatisation by the Thatcher government.

In April, BT imposed a pay award of between 3-8 percent on 58,000 of its frontline staff, with annual RPI inflation at 11.1 percent. It has since climbed to 11.7 percent.

Workers are told to accept a de facto pay cut by BT chief executive Philip Jansen who received a 32 percent pay increase last year, taking his salary to £3.5 million—including bonuses and shares. The company raked in profits of £1.3 billion last year.

The strike action involves 10,000 BT staff (including 9,000 call centre workers) and 30,000 engineers at its subsidiary Openreach who maintain critical infrastructure from mobile phone networks and broadband internet to back-up generators for NHS systems. The Communication Workers Union (CWU) was handed resounding strike mandates of 91.5 percent and 95.8 percent respectively at the end of June.

The CWU delayed naming strike dates for over a week to plead with the company to re-open talks. CWU General Secretary Dave Ward promised no “knee jerk reaction” from the union. This was more than two months down the line from a unilaterally imposed pay cut, on top of a year long pay freeze! Last month the *Big Issue* magazine reported that at a food bank had been set up for EE (a BT subsidiary) call centre staff at their workplace in the north-east of England.

Falsely aligning the union bureaucracy with the sentiments of telecoms workers, Ward has stated,

“They’re using Swiss banks while our members are turning to food banks.”

The CWU suggests that rampant corporate profiteering is a fundamental departure from the norm. This is to deflect criticism for its collaboration with the company which plumbed new depths during the pandemic. The union gave BT free rein to suppress pay and cut jobs while claiming it was working with management to safeguard telecom workers’ long-term interests.

Last year the CWU agreed a pay freeze in return for a lump sum payment of £1,000, allowing the company to further suppress the real hourly rate of pay of telecom workers while rewarding its shareholders with a £761,000 dividend pay out. The union also blocked a national strike ballot to sign up to site closures demanded by BT Group causing widespread displacement of staff and threatening the elimination of 13,000 jobs.

Today the CWU is seeking to renew its partnership with the company by soft pedalling industrial action and proving its role as an industrial police force. Seeking reopened talks and a minimally improved pay offer, the union makes no reference to the 10 percent demand drawn up by the rank and file which it has formally adopted.

Announcing the strike dates at an online CWU members’ meeting, Ward said the union would appeal to BT Group’s shareholders, explaining, “We are going to host a meeting with shareholders directly, the CWU will call that meeting directly with major shareholders... we are going to explain how unfair it is and ask them to urge the company to get back around the negotiating table.”

The CWU is combining this attempt to woo the big investors with a letter to “all politicians” around the UK asking them to make it clear to BT that it is “unacceptable” to hide away from this dispute.

In the only reference to the many other disputes which

workers are currently engaged in, Ward stated that BT was the only company not involving the union in further negotiations. His worry is that the bureaucracy has not been offered a fig leaf to cover a sellout.

Ward and the CWU's line should be rejected. BT workers' allies are the millions of workers entering into struggle against wage suppression and austerity dictated by the Johnson government, not investors and their political representatives in Westminster.

The conditions for a unified struggle could not be more favourable, but the fight must be taken out of the hands of the union bureaucracy.

Around 3,500 Post Office workers concluded their third round of national strike action last week against a 3 percent pay offer and £500 lump sum, following a pay freeze last year. The state-run service of Crown and sub-post offices recorded a profit of £39 million in the year to April with the CWU noting that the figure is above the threshold for bonus payments for 600 managers.

At Royal Mail 115,000 postal workers at 1,500 workplaces voted for national strike action by a majority of 97.6 percent against the 2 percent pay award for this year imposed at the end of last month. This came after a below inflation offer of 6.5 percent, 4.5 percent of which was tied to concession and productivity increases, was rejected.

The CWU has stated its willingness to negotiate the charter of sweatshop conditions demanded by the privatised postal service, so long as it is handled separately from a "no strings pay agreement." The conditions include a two-tier workforce, reduced sick pay, total flexibility of working hours and compulsory Sunday working to help the company's highly profitable parcel service compete with Amazon.

Once again, the CWU's rhetoric over Royal Mail's profits and the inflated salary of chief executive Simon Thompson is so much hot air; the union cannot even raise itself to the level of making a pay demand.

Royal Mail has only averted strike action this week because the Unite union announced the suspension of a three-day national strike by 2,400 managers due to have started on Wednesday against 700 job losses and pay cuts of up to £7,000. The action was voted for by a majority of 86 percent, up to 89 percent in Northern Ireland.

A total of 1,200 managers' jobs were axed last year with Unite stating that further losses would undermine the Royal Mail's obligations to operate a six-day postal service. The union conducted a survey of 1,000 Royal Mail managers which showed that they had been unpaid

for 7,767 hours' work per week—the equivalent of 1,800 jobs—a devastating indictment of Unite's record.

Unite has now re-entered negotiations following a ballot of its members over "new proposals." National officer Mike Eatwell said, "Royal Mail's changed approach is noticeable but there is further to go."

The union is again suspending strike action on the flimsiest of pretexts. Royal Mail can rely on it and the CWU to undermine any joint struggle against its restructuring plans. The CWU did not indicate what position its more than 100,000-strong membership at Royal Mail should take towards the strike, but undoubtedly many workers would have refused to cross picket lines and work in unmanaged workplaces. The last thing either union wants is action which develops beyond their control.

But this is exactly what workers need to organise. In its recent statement raising the demand for a general election, the Socialist Equality Party explains, "Millions of workers want to join [the] struggle for an inflation-busting pay rise, with train drivers, post, BT telecoms and airport workers voting to strike by massive majorities and angry demands for action by teachers, doctors, nurses, council workers and others. But they confront a trade union bureaucracy determined to suppress the class struggle at all costs."

"We urge workers to build rank-and-file committees in every workplace, democratically accountable and led by the most respected worker militants, to take the fight into their own hands and unify their struggles against the common enemy."



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