

UK postal union sits on strike mandate at Royal Mail after 115,000 vote for action against 2 percent pay award

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The Communication Workers Union (CWU) is sitting on the largest strike mandate it has been handed for decades, refusing to name any dates for action against Royal Mail's imposition of a 2 percent pay award this year.

Around 115,000 postal workers at 1,500 workplaces returned a 97.6 percent vote for strike action in a 77 percent turnout, the CWU announced last Tuesday.

Deputy Secretary Terry Pullinger claimed the union would recommend strike action following a successful vote if Royal Mail had not changed its position. He was summoned to a meeting with management last month and informed the 2 percent award would be implemented by company diktat. But now that the union has been handed its mandate it is rapidly rowing back, repeating worthless pleas to the company to reconsider its position.

The situation is untenable. Workers have voted to mobilise their collective strength against the company's impoverishing pay decree. The allegiance of the CWU, however, is not to its membership but the company, with which it hopes to restore the corporatist relations which have produced mega profits at the expense of postal workers' pay and conditions.

At a briefing of "assembled activists" announcing the ballot result, the CWU attempted to justify its decision to sit on its hands. The union reports that General Secretary Dave Ward and Pullinger set out "the reasons why strikes would not be called immediately and that it would be right to give the company an opportunity to think again on pay. But that, in the event of a clear refusal to budge action would be called."

The briefing took place in York as the CWU assembled to appeal to the AGM of Royal Mail shareholders taking place in the city the next day. Ward stated, "We're saying to shareholders, you shouldn't be supporting what these

people are doing and what they're paying themselves and you should be getting behind the workforce."

Postal workers should reject this pro-business agenda and strategy of bankrupt moral appeals to the boardroom via its major investors. The AGM in fact decided to award a further pay-out to shareholders of £130 million, in addition to the £400 million showered on them last November.

Royal Mail have not reconsidered anything. It has piled a bonfire of terms and conditions onto the misery of low pay, spelt out in a communication sent out to all postal workers titled "The change we need" the day after the strike ballot result was announced. It includes the following:

- Annualised hours with the total flexibility of the working week eliminating any work-life balance.
- A working week varying between 32 hours and 44 hours depending on seasonal workloads, with notice of just 4 to 10 weeks of work patterns.
- Work patterns intended only "as a guide", meaning duties would have to be completed regardless of the stated finishing time.
- Reductions in sick pay, with the first week of a second absence in a 12-month period paid at the rate of Statutory Sick Pay—just £99.35 for the week.
- A two-tier workforce meaning new entrants work a longer 40-hour week and receive 10 percent less in hourly wages than existing staff.
- Compulsory Sunday working paid at normal Monday-Saturday rates, phased in first among new entrants and in offices where Sunday is currently worked on a voluntary basis.
- An insulting productivity-based bonus payment of £500 an employer per year, pushing workers to put in back-breaking shifts to make up for a de facto pay cut.

These sweatshop conditions are to enable Royal Mail to compete with Amazon in its more profitable parcel delivery service. Royal Mail has also cited the prospect of strike action as a pretext to bring forward plans to spin off its international parcels business GLS, which accounted for two-thirds of its profits in the last three years. The managed decline of its letters division and attempts to wriggle free from a six-day household delivery service under the Universal Service Obligation will be accelerated.

Plans to conduct a scorched earth policy against postal workers' rights had been flagged by Royal Mail well in advance. Many of the concessions demanded in "The change we need" were included as givebacks in the initial 5.5 percent offer from the company in April. This was withdrawn to enforce the base pay uplift of just 2 percent.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted, the CWU stated at the time that it would only ballot over a "no strings" pay agreement but that it did not consider any of the concessions and productivity demands as non-negotiable on a separate basis.

The union has now organised a second national strike ballot over the concessions demanded by Royal Mail which opens on July 27 and closes on August 17. It described the company's proposals as "unacceptable change" but only on the basis that they are being implemented unilaterally. The CWU is defending previous company-union agreements such as Pathway to Change (PtC) through which the union has already signalled its agreement to establish the new levels of exploitation.

Pullinger and Royal Mail chief executive Simon Thompson signed the framework agreement for PtC last November, agreeing to the restructuring of operations in the name of further competitiveness. The CWU has stated that there is "absolutely nothing" raised by Royal Mail CEO or Chair Keith Williams which "could not be raised, discussed and negotiated via the various mechanisms, protocols and joint working groups provided within the existing agreement." It adds that "improving efficiency, duty patterns, aligning workload, rebalancing the operations towards parcels, technology deployment, for example are all covered within the Pathway to Change."

In blocking strike action over pay, the CWU is attempting to reprise the role it played in 2020 when it cancelled national strike action to work together with the company and government "to put the national interests first" during the pandemic. Postal workers were left defenceless as infections, lead to wildcat walkouts.

Royal Mail took its place in the ranks of the pandemic profiteers, quadrupling profits in the financial year to March 2021 to £728 million.

The dispute over pay must be taken out of the hands of the CWU and joined up with the fight against the charter for sweatshop conditions the union is happy to negotiate. This requires the establishment of rank-and-file committees to press for postal workers' interests, including an inflation-busting pay increase and a defence of terms and conditions, in opposition to the joint management-union framework.

Divisions maintained by the CWU between struggles over essentially the same issues must also be overcome. The union has isolated the national strike at the Post Office by around 3,500 workers against a government-driven pay award of just 3 percent this year. Three rounds of strike action have been held since May.

At BT Group 40,000 call centre workers and engineers voted emphatically for the first national strike at the company since 1987, but the CWU has restricted this to token stoppages on Friday this week and Monday next. The UK telecoms giant imposed a below-inflation deal back in April of just 4.8 percent. The union has dropped any reference to the pay demand drawn up by the rank and file for a 10 percent increase. It is desperate for the company to offer something it can spin to its membership to end the dispute.

A unified movement of postal and telecom workers, joining the fight by rail workers, would unshackle the social force which can defeat wage suppression, job losses and the destruction of conditions. But such a struggle requires overcoming the grip of the union bureaucracy and its slavish support for the Labour Party lending critical support to a crisis-ridden Tory government furthering its agenda of austerity, mass infection and war.



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