

# UK: Strike by 40,000 BT workers builds growing opposition to Tory-imposed austerity

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The two-day strike at BT on July 29 and August 1 sees 40,000 telecoms workers join with rail workers and hundreds of thousands of others in a growing fightback against the corporations and the Conservative government's refusal to agree a living wage.

This is the first company wide strike since 1987 and the first national strike by call centre workers throughout the UK. It takes place after the fourth day of national strike action by the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union involving 40,000 rail workers over pay and against the destruction of jobs, terms and conditions, who were joined by 4,000 TSSA clerical workers. It begins a day before a one-day strike across the rail network by train drivers union ASLEF in opposition to a three year pay freeze.

The action involves 10,000 BT staff (including 9,000 call centre workers) and 30,000 engineers at its subsidiary Openreach, all members of the Communication Workers Union (CWU).

BT workers are defying the imposition of a pay award for this year of £1,500 in April on 58,000 frontline staff—a rise of between 3 and 8 percent depending on salary. BT Chief Executive Philip Jansen said the miserly deal was “generous”, after helping himself to 32 percent pay increase last year that put him on £3.5 million a year. The company has set aside £90 million for the pay award for over half its workforce, compared to a £760 million hand out to shareholders after recording £1.3 billion in profits.

The rising cost of living has triggered deep seated opposition to the corporate boardroom and shareholders plundering of the wealth produced by telecom workers under the terrible circumstances of a global pandemic.

The situation facing BT workers is replicated at Royal Mail, with the company imposing a de facto pay rise of 2 percent by “executive decision” in June on

115,000 postal workers.

They would be joining the fight at BT had the CWU not pushed any possible strike action at Royal Mail back until late August, after receiving a 97.6 vote for action last Tuesday.

The union is following the same path taken at BT of delaying strike action based on worthless appeals for management to re-enter talks. The CWU has now organised a second strike ballot over Royal Mail adopting the same unilateral approach to tearing up terms and conditions and demanding a two-tier workforce, compulsory Sunday working at normal rates and reduced sick pay. The company has been emboldened by the CWU indicating that this sweatshop charter was negotiable.

A similar situation prevails at the Post Office, which has not moved any further than a pay offer of just 3 percent and a £500 lump sum, after around 3,500 CWU members have taken part in three rounds of national strike action since May. This is on top of the pay freeze last year at the state-owned postal service as it enforces a below inflation pay cap in line with government policy for 2 million public sector workers including National Health Service workers and teachers.

This has left the initiative with the employers and government, who would otherwise by now be pinned back by the combined action of more than 150,000 telecom and postal workers alongside hundreds of thousands of others.

The CWU's verbal denunciations of corporate greed should be measured against its enforcing of a pay freeze at BT last year and agreeing to more than 10,000 redundancies through the closure of sites across the UK, aimed at reducing them from 300 to 30.

CWU General Secretary Dave Ward stated in relation to the disputes at BT and Royal Mail, “They're using

Swiss banks while our members are turning to food banks.” But amid references to inflated CEO salaries and workers’ impoverishment the CWU doesn’t even specify a pay demand.

The 10 percent demand drawn up earlier this year is never mentioned, let alone revising it upward in line with runaway inflation set to top 12 percent. A pre-strike online meeting on July 25 attended by over 10,000 telecom workers was addressed by Ward, CWU Assistant General Secretary for Telecoms & Financial Services Andy Kerr and CWU President Karen Rose.

All spoke only of “more money” and a “better deal”, with the sole purpose of presenting any crumbs offered by BT as a victory in order to derail a genuine fight.

The union bureaucracy wants nothing more than to be back in the room with management with their noses in the trough. Ward complained that in all other disputes taking place, the unions had been involved in continuing talks. Kerr cited the example of the RMT in the rail dispute, falsely claiming that talks with Network Rail and the train operating companies had been “making progress”.

In response to messages at the meeting urging an escalation of the strike action, Ward reiterated his call for BT workers to get behind the CWU campaign to exert pressure on the company by securing the endorsement of its big investors and all political parties.

The CWU knows that there is little support for this pipedream of wooing of big business and its political representatives in Westminster. BT workers would rather see their picket lines joined by other sections of workers in struggle, including the post, rail, bus, NHS workers and others across the public sector.

The CWU said that there will be hundreds of picket lines across the UK during the two-day strike action at BT and Openreach, but it delayed publishing the list of locations until the very last day to curtail active involvement from other sections of the working class. The leaflet the union is circulating on strike days calling for support makes a pathetic appeal to email Jansen to “tell him to support BT and Openreach workers.”

This is under conditions in which BT workers have reported a sustained campaign of management intimidation to try and break the strike, including falsely informing apprentices they are not allowed to strike, telling non-union workers it is illegal for them to

participate and keeping a register of striking workers.

The CWU’s smothering of three national disputes epitomizes the role of the entire trade union bureaucracy in seeking to prevent the working class from intervening in the crisis of the Tory government to secure its own social and political interests.

Transport Secretary Grant Shapps this week announced further measures to outlaw strikes to complete “Thatcher’s unfinished business,” while Labour Party leader Sir Keir Starmer sacked his shadow transport minister for daring to set foot on the picket line of rail workers. This is proof of the unanimity of all the pro-business parties in their commitment to suppress resistance from the working class.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has outlined a perspective to combat this political conspiracy and bring it to an end. It has raised the demand for a general election, combined with a general strike fought for through the building of rank-and-file committees in every workplace and industry to bring the full social force of the working class to bear in a frontal assault against the corporate oligarchy.

As it states, “We will use the general election to make the case for strikes, mass protests and the organisation of a general strike to stop the war, force the adoption of a zero-COVID policy, and build support for a socialist alternative to capitalism. This is essential under conditions in which the trade unions are suppressing a growing strike movement and preventing any political challenge to the Tory government and to Labour’s right-wing policies.

“We will give a voice to the millions of workers whose views are never asked for, let alone represented politically.”



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