

UK: 170,000 telecom and postal workers to strike at BT Group, Royal Mail and Post Office

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Up to 170,000 telecom and postal workers will take six days of selective strike action across Britain from Friday.

The largest contingent in the national strike action are 115,000 post workers at Royal Mail who strike across 1,500 workplaces August 26/31 and September 8/9. This is the first national strike at Royal Mail since 2009, prior to its privatisation in 2013. At BT Group 40,000 telecom workers including call centre staff and engineers will strike on August 30/31. Around 3,500 Post Office workers at Crown Offices and in the admin and supply chain will strike on August 26, 27 and 30.

The stoppages, presented by Communication Workers Union (CWU) General Secretary Dave Ward as co-ordinated strike action, are aimed at stemming demands from the rank and file for a more decisive struggle. Postal and telecoms workers returned mandates of over 90 percent for strike action in all their ballots. On the CWU Facebook page workers have posted comments calling for indefinite action and a general strike.

The selective stoppages will mean that all three sections of workers will not be out together as one, even though telecom and postal workers are under the same attack and could bring key parts of infrastructure to a grinding halt.

The CWU has presented no unified pay demand as inflation has climbed to 12.3 percent and the privatised utilities of BT and Royal Mail and the government-owned Post Office continue to reap profits. For Post Office workers the strike action will be their fourth round since May 3. In response to the previous one-day stoppages each revised pay offer from the original 2 percent has fallen further behind rising inflation.

If the CWU was engaged in a real fight it would not be describing the latest revised offer of 5 percent plus a £500 bonus as “a shift” by management and sitting down at last ditch talks to avert strike action. The Post Office is even holding fast to its pay freeze from last year. Yet, ahead of the talks, CWU National Officer Andy Furey stated, “We’re encouraged by this improved pay offer and it’s our hope that, in the talks next week, we can move further towards a fair and reasonable pay agreement – not only for 2022/23, but for 2021/22 as well.”

At BT Group and its Openreach subsidiary, and at Royal Mail, below inflation pay awards were imposed. The telecoms giant imposed a pay award of between 3 and 8 percent in April and Royal Mail followed suit in June with a crippling 2 percent pay award.

Following two days of strike action on July 29 and August 1 at BT, management has re-opened talks but made no retreat from the below inflation pay deal imposed. CWU Assistant General Secretary Andy Kerr presented this as an achievement because the company was “back round the table” with the union.

At Royal Mail the CWU sat on the largest strike mandate in decades at the end of July, delaying announcing strike dates until August 10. It received another 98.7 percent strike vote on August 17 against the imposition of new working practices to sweep away pay, terms and conditions.

At both BT and Royal Mail, the CWU announced that a key focus of its campaign would be meetings with major shareholders and investors to convince them to side with workers against the chief executives! The recent AGM of Royal Mail decided to award a further pay-out to shareholders of £130 million, in addition to

the £400 million showered on them last November.

The CWU hailed a boardroom coup to remove chief executive Rico Back in May 2020, claiming this would result in a more compassionate form of management. The real reason for his removal was that his open display of corporate arrogance had become a liability to the continued collaboration of the CWU with the “modernisation” program to gut pay, terms and conditions.

Under the catastrophic conditions of the pandemic, the new consensus forged between the CWU and management allowed Royal Mail to go on a profit-fuelled rampage at postal workers’ expense. Designated as essential workers, they were forced to stay on the job and their health and welfare disregarded as infections swept through workplaces.

Postal workers resorted to wildcat strikes to enforce minimum safety regulations in defiance of the industrial truce agreed between the CWU and Royal Mail following its cancellation of national strike action earlier in 2020. The CWU used the pretext of the Royal Mail serving as an auxiliary emergency service delivering test and tracing kits to assert that management and workers were one team working in the national interest.

The real purpose of this collaboration was to help boost company profits by allowing the company to take advantage of the increase in online shopping through parcel deliveries. Royal Mail took its place among the pandemic profiteers, seeing its profits quadruple in the financial year to 2021, to £726 million.

Since the removal of Rico Back, his successor as chief executive Simon Thompson and chair Keith Williams have been preparing the imposition of pay restraint and the tearing up of terms and conditions, courtesy of the CWU. While Ward claims the CWU will not accept “levelling down”, the only stated objection by the union to “The change we need” charter of sweatshop conditions is that they must be implemented via consultation. Proposed changes include compulsory Sunday working paid at normal rates, reduction in sick pay and a two-tier workforce with new entrants paid 10 percent less.

While the CWU is looking to get back around the table with the company, Royal Mail is preparing a strikebreaking operation through the recruitment of agency labour and the use of management grades. The

company states on its website that it has “well-developed contingency plans”, which will focus on its profitable parcels to the exclusion of mail delivery.

Unite, which represents managerial staff, has acknowledged that the company intends to use its own members in this operation and plans to operate 300+ hubs during the industrial action. But it has openly stated that it will not oppose the strikebreaking role assigned to it by Royal Mail. Its advice to members is to report to work as normal, with a disclaimer stating that it is down to individuals to decide whether to respect the picket lines!

Unite General Secretary Sharon Graham is not prepared to organise the most basic form of solidarity action, which would bring the union into conflict with draconian anti-strike laws, for fear of encouraging wider unofficial action.

Royal Mail is only able to play different sections of the workforce off against each other because of the divisive role of the CWU and Unite, which have opposed any unified action against the destruction of pay and jobs. Unite called off a three-day national strike by 2,400 managers in late July against 700 job losses and pay cuts of £7,000 to re-enter talks with management ahead of the impending national action by postal workers.

The unification of telecoms and postal workers can only be achieved by breaking out of the corporatist straitjacket of the CWU and Unite. Rank-and-file committees should be established to genuinely co-ordinate the strike action to defeat the employers and government and draw up demands for a genuine pay rise.

Postal workers should reach out to Amazon workers who have mounted wildcat strikes against sweatshop pay and conditions to forge their class unity against the benchmark set by the global giant being used to ramp up exploitation at Royal Mail and expand the fight against the entire corporate elite.



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