

UK postal workers speak as national strike begins: London, Sheffield and Manchester

“We have no choice but to strike and fight”

Our reporters
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World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with Royal Mail and post office workers on picket lines across the UK on Friday, during the first of six days of strikes. A second set of interviews published August 27 is here .

London

At the **Mount Pleasant depot** picket line in London, striker Derrick said, “We are out on strike today for money. They are cutting our pay, they are cutting our hours, cutting our pensions, the whole lot. We have got to make a stand. Royal Mail is attacking London Weighting [an allowance paid to some workers in Greater London to help with the higher cost of living in the capital] and making us work Sundays.

“They are trying to kill the job. If you come into Royal Mail now looking for a secure job and secure pension, if they get away with this, you’re coming out with nothing. You’ll be working by the day to see what you can get. I cannot retire. There won’t be enough money in the pension to survive. All security would be gone.”

Of the pay deal enforced by Royal Mail, he said, “They imposed 2 percent after tax, it is nothing. It’s a pittance, 5 percent would be a pittance. On top of that is the cost-of-living rises. We need to go in big with the strikes to come out with something decent to survive on.

“Everyone should come out on strike to have a fair chance and a decent standard of living, postmen, teachers, nurses, firemen. Everyone should come out on strike over a whole week.”

Of Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer’s instruction that shadow front bench MPs must not visit picket lines, he said, “It goes against the grain of what the Labour Party was founded to do... he is going against the strikes. What is Labour for? Are they Conservatives?”

Another postal worker said, “We are on strike because we fail to reach an agreement with Royal Mail on a pay deal. Later on, Royal Mail wanted to talk about our terms and conditions. The strike began when Royal Mail imposed a 2 percent pay increase without negotiation.

“It’s a slap in the face, an absolute disrespect considering what we have just been subjected to with the pandemic and the people that we’ve just lost--some very good friends.

“The 2 percent doesn’t change anything for us financially. What bill does that cover? While they come out of their shiny houses and million-pound apartments!

“The Labour Party are a clone of the Conservative Party. I don’t see many differences. I’ve heard various Labour MPs who are against us striking.”

Sheffield

At Royal Mail’s **Brightside Lane Mail Centre** in Sheffield, WSWs reporters spoke to pickets of distribution and collection drivers, and mail centre workers.

At the first picket, a CWU rep who has worked for Royal Mail for 32

years, explained, “We are out over pay. Royal Mail has imposed a 2 percent pay rise on us which is linked to unacceptable change. Ultimately the changes they are demanding will take even more money out of our pockets, taking allowances away from us.”

Many postal workers agreed they would not accept a pay rise below inflation, set to rise from over 12 percent now to 21 percent next spring.

James said, “The cost of living is impacting everyone. Many people are already just treading water. It is ridiculous for a company this size making the money it does to say, ‘you are not worth paying’”.

During the pandemic he was shielding due to health reasons, “But there were many others working through it. It was tough conditions, people were nervous. Although they were not vulnerable, they had family who they were going home to who were. Everyone was shopping online so the company made huge profits, but there’s no decent pay rise.

“A general strike is absolutely necessary. It’s crucial we come together across all industries and take on this government. Lots of companies are making lots of money which isn’t going to workers but shareholders. The gap between the bottom and top earners is getting wider.”

James had read about the NHS Confederation’s warning that the UK was heading towards “a humanitarian crisis” because of the energy price rises. “I also read the material from the BMJ [British Medical Journal] who in 2016 attributed 120,000 deaths to austerity. The pandemic and cost of living will make millions live in poverty and die. The Tories are ridiculous, they couldn’t care less for people’s lives. They have to go.”

At the picket outside the main entrance for mail workers, strikers discussed the intolerable conditions they are facing. One said, “It is becoming impossible to live and provide for your family. It will be getting worse. We have to fight this; we can’t cope any more. This is what confronts everyone.”

Another agreed that postal workers must be united with other workers and supported the call of the Socialist Equality Party for a general strike. Strikers were critical of the Trades Union Congress, with one saying, “They are not doing anything to unite us all or call for any action.”

Another picket who had recently become a union rep recalled how postal workers suffered during the pandemic. She said, “We worked so hard as we were classified key workers. It was even busier than Christmas, which is always very challenging. People got sick. Some people died. There were 15 CWU members we know of who died from COVID. Profits went up, everyone was shopping online. Then they turn around, after all we did and tell us we deserve 2 percent when they have made millions. It is such a slap in the face. They can’t get away with this.”

Manchester

At Royal Mail’s **Manchester Mail Centre** on Oldham Road, a worker with several decades experience said, “As the slogan says, ‘Enough is

enough', we can't carry on like this. We have fat cat bosses making millions and people here will die when the winter comes. Look at Ukraine; they have money for bombs but not money for a pay rise for us. The whole infrastructure, water, rail, post, buses, they all need re-nationalising. Everything was sold off for next to nothing and now we have CEOs paid millions for failing and we just want a fair share of the wealth."

Speaking about the strike wave across Britain he said, "My favourite people are the Felixstowe [dock] workers who have come out. We could stop this country if we joined the strikes and I think a general strike is in the air. This country does not have a cost-of-living crisis, we have a cost of greed crisis. We want a fair day's pay so we can pay our way. I'm really earning less than when I started here in the early 1990s."

Another worker who had been at Royal Mail for over 30 years said of the proposed modernisation of the industry, "I'm not against technology but it is being used against workers. What is happening is the technology will take our jobs and then we will be back to Victorian times and conditions."

"For me it's one hundred percent we need a general strike with the first aim of getting rid of the Tories. But I'm not a fan of Starmer. How can the Labour Party have a leader who is a Sir and a Labour leader who tells MPs not to go on picket lines to support workers on strike?"

Another striker interjected, "We have no choice but to strike and fight. I don't want to strike but what can we do? I don't want to starve either. We have to fight because it's in our blood as working class people. We have always had to fight."

Another picket said, "Terms and conditions have been eroded year after year until now and we're being offered a miserable pay rise after working through COVID. We worked, risked our lives and our family's lives, and our reward is a paltry pay offer and job losses."

A group of pickets spoke about mail workers they knew who got infected with COVID. One said, "Nearly all of them had gotten COVID and one of them was seriously ill, at death's door. This is how we're treated."

"Our pensions have been cut. We started with a good final salary pension then we went to a defined pension. You have to pay in for longer and instead of being able to draw the pension at 60, it's now 65. Our pensions have been cut by 40 percent."

"This strike is not just about pay, its terms and conditions and everything else. Look at the cost of living, how can we live with food prices rising, cost of energy rising? We are trying to keep what we have. We had rights and now our kids have no rights."

"We've had our workload doubled, our jobs changed overnight, and we are under resourced since 2017. We are doing the jobs of 2-3 people for less pay"

In response to WSWs reporters noting Prime Minister Boris Johnson's declaration this week that workers had to "endure the pressure" of rising bills to pay for the arming of Ukraine, a picket said, "The war in Ukraine is a proxy war. Zelensky is not fighting for democracy. There is no opposition allowed in Ukraine and all the denials about the fascist Azov battalions will not change the truth. The fight in Ukraine is about the US dollar not democracy."

"I am not a Putin supporter but what choice did he have. He was surrounded and the attack started for real in 2014 [when the Maidan Square anti-Russian coup took place]. The Russian language was outlawed and fascists linked to the Nazis were organising. As for Johnson and 'we have to suffer', I don't want a penny of my money going to kill children, Ukrainian or Russian."

At Royal Mail's depot in **Ardwick, Manchester**, a picket said, "They want to rip our contracts up. They want us to work Sundays. That was not in our agreements. We didn't sign up to annualised hours."

"The ones changing these agreements think we just come in and pick up

a bag and go out delivering. We are actually sorting the mail and doing the parcels. There are about 60 of us and we are covering three postcodes and the universities and the Manchester Royal Infirmary."

"It used to be 70/30, the ratio of full to part-time workers. Now the ratio is virtually equal and when someone gets sacked they don't replace them. So we are carrying that extra work and they expect us to do more work. There's been depot closures. I know there were about three or four that have closed just in east Manchester."

"One of the statements from top management was that 'You need to walk quicker'".

Another worker agreed saying, "Another top manager said that 'everything is OK with Royal Mail apart from the delivery'."

"The Royal Mail want to be like Amazon delivering parcels, as that's where the money is. They want us to be working four days a week on delivery [letters to households] but seven days a week delivery on parcels."

His colleague said, "They want to make the biggest profit but not help the workforce out. The shareholders got £200 million and the bosses got a million pounds each. Why do they have to make such profits? Everything is going up except wages. They want it here like at Amazon, where you only get paid for what you deliver."

A picket said, "I don't think the country is a good place to be in, it's in disarray", to which another replied, "I don't think anywhere in the world is in a good place."

"The biggest mistake ever was to privatise mail. Nothing should have been privatised, the steel and coal and everything should have stayed public."

"Look at the National Health Service. It's shocking how their staff are treated, they are so overworked. And then look at how the patients are treated because they haven't got the care and the staff to look after them."

"They are all the same. How can you have a Labour leader with a title, a barrister with a title? He's not for the working class."

During a discussion over Royal Mail's surging profits, a striker said that during the pandemic, "It was like profiteering through war. The normal people have kept the country going and the companies were profiteering when people have died. The fat cats are there getting richer and we're getting poorer."

Further interviews from pickets will be published tomorrow.



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