

UK: Royal Mail and Post Office workers begin first of a series of strikes, BT to follow

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Royal Mail and Post Office workers took national strike action Friday, covering a combined workforce of up to 120,000.

There were large turn outs on picket lines at delivery offices, mail centres and Parcelforce depots across the UK.

The national strike at Royal Mail by 115,000 workers covering 1,500 workplaces is an initial one-day stoppage out of four scheduled over the next two weeks. For Post Office workers across 114 Crown offices and in the admin and supply chain, this is the fourth round of stoppages since the start of May.

Both sections of workers are members of the Communication Workers Union (CWU), as are 40,000 call centre workers and engineers at telecoms giant BT and its Openreach subsidiary who are due to begin a second round of two-day stoppages from next Tuesday.

The six days of selective action by over two-thirds of the CWU's 200,000 membership is part of a growing rebellion by workers against corporate and government decreed pay restraint. Post and telecoms workers have now joined with national rail strikes, indefinite strike action on several regional bus networks, and eight days of strike action at the UK's largest container port at Felixstowe.

The CWU were forced to announce strikes because the privatised utilities of BT and Royal Mail have unilaterally imposed below inflation pay awards in April and June of between 3 and 8 percent, and 2 percent respectively. The government-owned Post Office has refused to reverse a pay freeze from last year or offer more than 5 percent in line with its overall policy of pay restraint among public sector workers.

The union is frantically seeking a pretext for a sell-out. It faces an increasing mood of opposition among workers aware that unaffordability claims by the companies are exploded by profits paid out in windfall dividends and

management bonuses while their own income is eaten away by inflation that has reached over 12 percent.

While CWU General Secretary Dave Ward pays lip service to workers' anger, the CWU repeatedly invokes the mantra of corporate responsibility, seeking to restore its comfortable relations with the employers that have facilitated a decades-long offensive against postal and telecom workers.

The week leading up to the strike saw forlorn attempts by the CWU to find grounds with management to call off the action. The CWU prepared for Post Office stoppages by entering arbitration through ACAS. While forced to acknowledge that a 5 percent rise was inadequate, National Officer Andy Furey claimed the latest revised offer including an insulting lump sum of £500 was a step in the right direction.

Furey has pointed out that last year's pay freeze was aimed at delivering £38 million yearly profits, the benchmark at which management bonuses are paid, noting the Post Office has recorded a further £39 million profits this year.

At Royal Mail the CWU has bemoaned the fact that Chief Executive Simon Thompson has not attended pay talks and that the company turned down its appeal for talks at a "summit" with Royal Mail Chairman Keith William.

Royal Mail's response to such peace overtures, following the CWU's delay in naming strike dates, has been to mount a strike breaking operation, hiring agency staff and transferring work from its Parcelforce subsidiary to transnational delivery rival Evri (Hermes).

The central rally organised at Mount Pleasant Mail Centre in London was fronted by CWU leader Ward with Mick Lynch, General Secretary of the RMT. It was an exercise in empty militant tub thumping and political apologetics for Labour.

Lynch reprised his role in shielding Labour from

workers' growing anger, claiming Labour Party leader Sir Keir Starmer had to make up his mind and "wake up and smell the coffee look out the window the people are on the move". But millions of workers already know Labour is unreservedly on the side of big business, with even the token presence of frontbench Labour MPs on picket lines outlawed by Starmer.

Lynch dropped even a passing reference to a general strike, speaking instead of a "summer of solidarity" continuing until next spring. Both Lynch and Ward were silent on the role of Unite, led by General Secretary Sharon Graham, in helping to facilitate what amounts to a strike breaking operation by Royal Mail.

Unite instructed its members among management grades to report to work as normal today despite knowing the company intended to use them to break the strike, reporting that around "300+hubs" had been set up as part of this agenda. The union bureaucracy is not prepared to defy anti-strike laws even when they involve playing a supporting role alongside scab firms and agency workers in line with legislation introduced by the Conservative government.

Ward admitted that postal workers had even been denied basic equipment during the pandemic which had led to the loss of many lives. But this was presented as "heroic efforts", which "kept Royal Mail going."

Postal workers attempted to resist through wildcat action against the spread of workplace infections because of the collusion between the CWU and management, which claimed the company was functioning as an extra emergency service while it carried on with its pandemic profiteering.

Ward also pointed to the CWU's loyal role in corporate restructuring stating, "We have given Royal Mail every bit of automation they wanted, every bit of technology they wanted."

The cost of the blank cheque signed by the CWU ever since privatisation is measured in the loss of thousands of jobs, closures of delivery and mail centres, productivity increases and the elimination of the second delivery service.

For all the talk by Ward of opposing Royal Mail becoming "another gig economy and P&O employer", the CWU has stated that the overhaul of terms and conditions demanded by the company to rival Amazon and other competitors are negotiable.

The CWU's last ditch attempts to avert the strike were backed by Labour. Deputy leader Angela Rayner, Shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves and Shadow Secretary for

Business and Industry Strategy Jonathan Reynolds have written to Royal Mail's chair and chief executive to express their disappointment that they had not taken up the offer of "meaningful talks." They maintain that the FTSE 250 company remains a public service, rather than a cash cow for shareholders in order to support the attempts by the CWU to renew its corporate relations with Royal Mail and end the strike, citing "the national interest."

The Labour and trade union bureaucracy share a common fear of the growth of the class struggle.

Attempts to stem social opposition are also a critical element of the British ruling class's drive to turn the proxy war by NATO powers in Ukraine against Russia into a direct military conflict.

Liz Truss, the candidate mostly likely to succeed Boris Johnson as Conservative Prime Minister, declares her readiness to press the nuclear trigger, while Johnson used a trip to Ukraine to lecture workers on the need to accept rising fuel poverty as part of the war effort, as energy companies gauge bigger profits and legislation is prepared to outlaw strikes.

The Socialist Equality Party is fighting for a combined industrial and political and offensive to unshackle the social power of the working class against the Tory government and Labour's right-wing policies. This is the basis of the call for a General Strike and General Election. We explained:

"Our aim is to mobilise the working class in opposition to the ruthless assault on living standards and democratic rights; the relentless escalation of the war against Russia, even to the point of risking a nuclear war; and the criminal refusal to end a pandemic and allow mass infection and death; and to build support for a socialist alternative to capitalism."



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