

UK: Royal Mail workers stage second 24-hour national strike with more to follow

Our reporters
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Around 115,000 postal workers staged their second national one day strike across 1,500 workplaces at Royal Mail following the 24 four-hour stoppage last Friday. A further round of strike action is planned for consecutive days on September 8-9.

As with the strike at BT and Openreach by 40,000 telecom workers, there were large pickets mounted at delivery offices, mail centres and Parcelforce depots across the UK.

The postal and telecom workers are all members of the Communication Workers Union (CWU), but there was no attempt by the union to encourage BT and Royal Mail workers to even attend each other's picket lines. Both privatised utilities have implemented below inflation pay awards unilaterally—at BT of 3 to 8 percent and Royal Mail just 2 percent—while recording huge profits and payouts to shareholders.

The staggered six days of strike action—which includes workers at government-run Crown Post Offices—has been used by the CWU to stem demands for more unified and extensive strike action. The selective action has meant that up to 170,000 postal and telecom workers have not struck together.

At a rally held by the union last Friday at Mount Pleasant Mail Centre in London, CWU General Secretary Dave Ward promised the “biggest fight”. The same day he rang to try and speak with Royal Mail chief executive Simon Thompson, who was inside the building, leaving a message for him to come outside and “have a chat.”

This was presented as a masterstroke wrong-footing Thompson who has said in a radio interview that the company was open to talks. But postal workers will not defeat the attacks they face by the union bureaucracy re-establishing its cosy relations with management or antics that are supposed to shame it.

The CWU has made no pay demand to defend workers living standards as inflation climbs to a 40 year high of

over 12 percent. The latest predicted is that it will hit 22 percent early next year.

Royal Mail has made clear it intends to push ahead unilaterally with both the de facto pay cut and stripping away of workers conditions outlined in its sweatshop charter, “The change we need.” Thompson told the BBC Friday, “Our reality is that the COVID bubble has burst, and we can see the economic situation around us all. And our reality today is we are losing £1 million a day. The change that we need is to pivot our business from a business that was built for letters into a business that can now win in the parcels market.”

The cynical reference to the pandemic proving a blessing for business sums up the criminality of the entire corporate elite. The privatised postal service saw its year on profits to March 2021 quadruple to £726 million through increased parcel deliveries, fuelled by online shopping. This relied on the CWU agreeing to everything demanded as infections spread in unsafe workplaces and workloads increased.

The profits from the pandemic has led Royal Mail to demand that its profitable parcel delivery service be placed on a competitive war footing against Amazon and its rivals at postal workers expense. Behind cynical condemnations of unacceptable change, the sole objection of the CWU is that it is being bypassed by management—pointing to its record of collaboration on mass redundancies and productivity increases.

The WWSWS spoke to postal and BT workers on picket lines who said they did not view their struggle as an isolated dispute, spoke about the huge inequality between workers and the corporate establishment and the need for broader action against the Conservative government.

At the **Winton Delivery Office** picket line in **Bournemouth**, workers discussed how the imposed 2 percent pay deal is a real term pay cut. In contrast, Royal Mail has handed out a further £130 million to its

shareholders on top of the £400 million in November.

One worker said that he came from Greece, where he was working six days a week, 7am-7pm, for a mere €600. He left the corrupt Greek government behind, where union leaders have become members of government, for a better life in the UK. "But here the heads of the unions also work hand in hand with the government!"

At **Sheffield City Delivery Office** on Pond Street over 50 postal workers mounted three picket lines covering all gates and entrances.

A striker who has worked in Royal Mail for more than 20 years explained, "This is not just about pay but terms and conditions. They are after our sick pay and pushing our hours back so we will be working in the dark on deliveries which is more unsafe.

"We should unite with Amazon workers as Royal Mail is using them and other delivery firms as the benchmark to take away our rights and this one struggle.

"The average CEO's pay is 109 times that of a worker. In the 1970's it was 29. [Conservative Party leadership favourite Liz] Truss becoming prime minister will aim to make it even harder to strike. They say the strikes are holding the country to ransom, but it is the government and bosses who are holding workers to ransom.

"We do need to get together all the struggles to overcome the sense of isolation. The entire working community is struggling. A general strike would be the way to get this message across."

On the picket line at **Royal Mail's Mount Pleasant Mail Centre in London**, a CWU rep spoke about the terrible situation during the height of the pandemic when postal workers died from the disease.

"There's hardworking people up and down the country who deliver to this country every single day. We saw it through the pandemic.

"There were very few ways of communicating and getting things around the country and we made that happen really quickly. Nobody ever heard of disruption within this industry, even during COVID when we had members out of work due to illness, and members who died.

"We did have deaths in this workplace as well. I think every family's been affected in some way.

"Royal Mail is a service to the public. It's over 500 years old. Every person in this country should be thinking, will I be getting my services for free in the future? Because if they have their way, they won't be. The other courier companies only service the cities. They're not servicing remote areas. That are a large percentage of this

country."

At **BT Tower in London**, engineer Rob said workers were striking in response to an intensifying cost of living crisis.

"We know there's call centre workers on 20 grand a year and some of them are using food banks. We shouldn't have people using food banks in this day-and-age. Especially working people. That's just scary.

"To do all that work through the whole pandemic, and then for the company to go, 'we're not bothered with what you think, we're just going to give you this rotten pay deal,' it's a kick in the teeth!"

At BT's **Openreach Regional Training School** in Legrams Lane, **Bradford**, a CWU union rep said, "Our members have worked through two years of COVID, and we've not had a decent pay rise in that time. It really brings it in when the shareholders awarded themselves 32 percent. It's executives first, shareholders second, customers third, and the workers at the bottom."

Another striker, Paul, said, "We are being taken back to Victorian days. We're opposed to a contract that is being imposed on us."

At Royal Mail's **Bradford South Delivery Office**, striker Alan said, "The new terms they are proposing, extended delivery times and Sunday working, will affect workers social life and in some cases their safety. Young female posties will have to go out into the night and that can be threatening.

"I rarely see my partner. If they bring in Sunday service, my days off are often in the mid-weekdays while my partner is at work. It means we won't have any time together."

Postman John said, "Royal Mail is competing with Amazon in the drive down to the bottom for workers." Referring to the new Royal Mail hub at Warrington in northwest England, which is several football fields in size, he was concerned that would see the distributor in Leeds closed.



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