

UK: Royal Mail workers launch third round of strikes

“The powers that be are pushing down on everyone and eventually there'll be an explosion”

Our reporters

8 September 2022

115,000 Royal Mail workers began a 48-hour strike on Thursday bringing postal services across the UK to a halt. But Communication Workers Union (CWU) officials cancelled Friday's strike “out of respect for the Queen”, exposing their deference to a monarchy that is the embodiment of class oppression and hereditary privilege.

Postal workers voted by nearly 99 percent for strike action. They are demanding a genuine pay raise in line with galloping inflation, against a 2 percent pay award imposed by the company. Royal Mail insists a further below-inflation increase of 3.5 percent is contingent on “productivity” and “workplace reforms” that will set fire to existing employment contracts.

It is demanding new delivery schedules to compete with parcel delivery services such as Amazon that employ a super-exploited gig workforce. Royal Mail wants delivery rounds to start two hours later each day, from 9am, with last post at 7pm or later. It wants compulsory Sunday working.

On Monday, CWU officials resumed talks with Royal Mail executives, issuing a statement later that day that “both parties have agreed to reflect on the position in the next 24 hours”.

But the company refused to budge on its restructuring agenda, stating, “any talks must be about both change and pay. Change is the route to higher pay”. It warned that further strikes would place workers on “a perilous path”. Royal Mail has threatened to hive off its profitable international parcel delivery company if its demands are blocked, while new Prime Minister Liz Truss has been at the forefront of plans to use essential services legislation to ban strikes.

An article in the *New Statesman*, “Nothing can stop the Royal Mail from breaking up”, set out the company's agenda. Noting its re-branding in July as International Distributions Services, the article explained, “This is a company of two parts: the Royal Mail, which has committed to deliver a letter anywhere in Britain for a fixed price since 1839 and was privatised in 2013, and the less memorable GLS (General Logistics Systems), an international parcel delivery service based in Amsterdam. The rebrand to International Distributions Services implies a commitment to the latter and, almost certainly, the splitting off of the Royal Mail.

“Postal industry analysts I've spoken to believe it makes business sense: GLS is a highly profitable international parcel service with opportunities for growth, while the Royal Mail is a public service that is currently losing a million pounds a day.”

Royal Mail, just like the National Health Service, railways, buses, BT and countless other sectors, will be cherry-picked, asset stripped and looted while basic services for the public, especially the elderly and poor, will be gutted. Postal workers will be reduced to minimum wage workers with no protections. As analysts told the *New Statesman*, Amazon has a

“competitive advantage” because they “are able to treat workers as a more disposable resource”.

Royal Mail workers explained on picket lines today that the company and its shareholders reaped record profits with the boom in online sales in the pandemic. Yet the workers who generated those profits are resorting to foodbanks. On September 1, Royal Mail executives awarded themselves shares worth over £2 million. The company has also denied it is in “secret talks” over a private equity buyout, but the vultures are circling, with Vesa Equity having raised its stake to 25 percent.

Royal Mail has no intention of backing down on its agenda. CWU officials, like those at the RMT, ASLEF, Unite and other unions, are working to divide, delay and suppress industrial action. Despite proclamations about a “summer of discontent”, the CWU isolated Royal Mail workers from BT and other striking workers, holding out the illusion of a negotiated settlement. With the government in meltdown following the resignation of Boris Johnson, the unions blocked the growing calls for a general strike. Their policing the class struggle gave the Tories the breathing space they needed to assemble the most right-wing government in British history.

The dispute cannot go forward unless workers take matters into their own hands. The grip of the CWU, which has presided over decades of attacks in partnership with Royal Mail, must be broken. Rank-and-file committees must be elected in every workplace to organise the necessary fightback, placing the needs of the working class over the drive for corporate profit.

At **Portsmouth Royal Mail Delivery Office** a picket explained, “I've been a postman for nearly 35 years. The trust these days has gone between the workers and management. They're trying to ruin the Royal Mail completely. Years ago, we were proud to work for the company, but these days we just feel they're taking everything away from us. It's all about money and greed.

“I think it's disgusting what's happening to all working class families now. They're getting ruined and forced down. We've got posties using food banks, but even food banks these days are struggling because nobody can afford to donate! I really feel for younger families who have just managed to get themselves on the property ladder but can no longer pay their mortgages, so some of them lose their homes.

“We've got this stiff upper lip in this country but eventually you realise enough is enough. I think we need to take to the streets like they did in France. Things have got to change, and the only way it's going to change is if people start to rebel. The powers that be are pushing down on everyone and eventually there'll be an explosion. I'm hoping there'll be a

general strike soon, and potentially a revolution. I want to see true equality, not all these greedy companies donating massive amounts to the Tory party.

“Liz Truss used to work for Shell Oil, and Shell Oil gave massive amounts of money to the Tories! It’s plutocracy! It’s borderline oligarchy! This country is supposedly the 6th richest in the world, working people shouldn’t be living like this.

“Privatisation has been a complete disaster. The shareholders get all the money, and the workers get nothing. It makes me sick. I support all the strikes right now from train drivers, bus drivers, BT workers, everybody. It’s the only way the working class can stand up for itself, but sometimes we have corrupt union leaders. So, I do believe the working class should ultimately lead the struggle themselves.”

Spencer said, “We’re on strike because Royal Mail are trying to destroy our terms and conditions and reduce our pay. I feel very strongly about the way we’re being treated, and I think the full privatisation of Royal Mail will bring shame upon this country. I’d like to see Royal Mail renationalised.

“We need a bigger pay rise than just 2 percent, and we want our terms and conditions to be left alone. We don’t want to lose our sick pay. Often, we’ve been made to work late hours in the dark. We deliver in some pretty rough and dangerous areas sometimes and it just isn’t safe. Sometimes there are no street lights. You can’t just shit on your workforce!

“We worked throughout the blistering heat this Summer, and we had to work as quickly as possible, it was exhausting. The way the company has rewarded themselves with all these bonuses and then told us we can’t have a basic pay rise is an insult. We’re one of the last public utilities in the UK, so I feel like this is our miner’s strike.

“We’re starting to see something similar to the 70s. I really hope something comes from all this strike action, otherwise the future will just be a subservient working class being enslaved by the rich. They go on about decent jobs for working people, but these have become a thing of the past. My parents used to go to work, do a decent job and have a nice quality of life, including a good house and a holiday once a year. It all seems like ancient history now. I feel someone needs to come up with a new economic model.

“I think we might end up having a general strike, but the media are trying to demonise the strikers. I hope a general strike will upset the established hierarchy and the system that runs this country. I’d like to see postal workers go on mass strike with everyone else, train drivers, Amazon workers, all of them.”

At the **Royal Mail Sheffield North Delivery Office** in Hillsborough, Richard explained, “I’ve worked here 33 years, and these are the worst changes we’ve ever faced. It’s the changing hours that’s the biggest concern for everyone, working from six till 10 every night and the safety involved in that. They don’t seem to be bothered about health and safety now at Royal Mail. It will mean working in the dark after 4 o’clock in winter. At the moment you have the right to finish on your time... and you can bring bags back, but they want to get rid of that, so you’d have to complete deliveries.”

His colleagues explained it would mean “trying to find people’s houses, and back doors in the dark on uneven surfaces, steps... it’s bad enough in the day sometimes. We all want to finish taking the mail out we’ve got, for the customers’ sake. However, the company want us to do revisions whereby they’ll give us more walking. We’re already walking a half-marathon five days a week, but there’s no support, there’s no physiotherapy, there’s no ice baths like athletes get.”

“On a good day you’ll walk 12 miles a day. And then I’ll come back in

and cover rounds where they don’t have people to cover it, which means staying out later. They’re wanting us to have late starting times and later finishing times and that means you’re going to be out till 7 or 8 o’clock at night.”

Another picketer said the changes would mean, “More missed deliveries, more customer complaints because you can’t see what you’re delivering. There’s more likelihood of accidents and then they’re taking away your sick pay.”

Another worker explained, “Every few months they’re bringing in new initiatives like ‘you’ll do collections from addresses now’. So sometimes you’ll have to take a label and put the label on the parcel. Customers don’t always know what the right way to do things is, so it can take 20 minutes to sort that out. They bring these initiatives in, but don’t bring any new resources in to do it, so the same amount of staff have got to do extra work, which is impossible.”

Workers agreed the company was trying to compete with Amazon and voiced support for a struggle with Amazon workers, instead of being pit against each other in a race to the bottom. One said, “During COVID there were projections of making a loss of £500 million, but then they make £760 million profit. They’re not wanting to give us anything.

“They imposed a 2 percent pay cut with another 3 percent if we accept changes. Well, we can’t accept it. Everything is going up, mortgages are going up, petrol’s going up, food’s going up, and I don’t know how they want us to survive.

His colleague agreed, “We risked our lives, working 12-hour days during that pandemic. At one point we were heroes.”

A female picket said of deliveries during lockdown, “We couldn’t share vans, so one of us was walking with a trolley for two miles to get to the start of the round. You were walking extra and there were no toilets. There was nothing open. No cafes open. Nowhere to get extra water or anything like that.”

She was also concerned about changes for new entrants, “Are they going to be on a lower pay than us? So people will have to work longer hours to get the same pay... So you’ll have a two-tier workplace? Because that’s what we don’t agree with.”

“That’s happening already,” said her colleague. “The newer staff members come on with different contracts, they’ve got Sunday [staff] under contract. So going forward, that’s already created a two-tier workforce. They want us to finish later—my childcare finishes at 4pm, so it’s going to cost us more money.

“They’re putting more and more on you, more and more responsibility for the same or less pay aren’t they”, his colleague agreed. “There’s been secret talks behind closed doors of splitting the company up. They don’t want the universal post because it’s not profitable.”

At **Bradford North Royal Mail DO** a striker explained, “Inflation is rising, we worked as key workers during the pandemic, not just us but all working class people. Now we’re being shafted with fire and rehire which they’re trying to bring in. They’re after our sick pay, they’re after changing the conditions of anyone who starts, longer hours, to divide and conquer.

“The chief executives are paying themselves millions and we haven’t had a pay rise in 10 years. They will order themselves £700,000 in shares, the CEOs, and they’re making money off our backs.

“I think it’s good that people are coming together. We should have a general strike to be honest, that’s the only way forward. It’s basically heading towards that anyway”.

Asked by our reporter what should replace the Tory government, he replied, “[Labour leader Sir Keir] Starmer’s Tory-lite for me, suspending his own MPs for being in the picket lines. He’s Blair Mark 2... I supported Corbyn but I don’t think Labour is for workers. I would support socialism.”

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