

Workers angered as UK post and rail unions call off strikes after queen's death

Robert Stevens
11 September 2022

The queen's death is being used as a political weapon to suppress a growing strike wave. On Thursday it was immediately seized on by the trade union bureaucracy to call off two national strikes, including a 48-hour strike of 115,000 postal workers already underway.

The Communication Workers Union (CWU) called off that strike and the Rail, Maritime and Transport (RMT) union called off two days of action due to take place on September 15 and 17.

Postal and rail workers are fighting against companies, backed by the government, seeking to enforce massively below inflation pay deals and attacks on terms, conditions and pension rights.

Strikes by both groups of workers, involving nearly 200,000 union members, have been at the centre of a summer strike wave that began in June and has included telecoms, bus workers, dockers, local government staff and barristers. Postal workers were on their third of four days of national strike action held over August and September, with the fourth strike day to be held on September 9. The RMT strikes next week would have been the 7th and 8th days of national action by their 50,000 members employed at train operating companies and Network Rail.

At 7 p.m., just 30 minutes after the death was announced, the RMT posted an announcement on its website and a tweet headed "RIP Queen Elizabeth II," reading "RMT joins the whole nation in paying its respects to Queen Elizabeth. The planned railway strike action on 15 and 17 September is suspended. We express our deepest condolences to her family, friends and the country." The black backgrounded tweet was accompanied by a photo of the queen.

The trade drivers union Aslef and white collar railway union TSSA also cancelled industrial action planned for September. Aslef echoed the RMT writing,

"In light of the sad news of Queen Elizabeth II's death, Aslef is postponing its industrial action on 15 September. We express our deepest condolences to her family, friends and the country."

Calling off the postal strike, the CWU tweeted at 7.18pm on September 8, within 50 minutes of the announcement of her death, "Following the very sad news of the passing of the Queen and out of respect for her service to the country and her family, the union has decided to call off tomorrow's planned strike action."

The Criminal Bar Association, currently holding an indefinite strike of its 2,000 barrister members, called off a planned demonstration.

The Royal College of Nursing announced it would delay launching a strike ballot of almost 300,000 members over pay, due to open this week, and said, "Campaigning will pause until further notice."

On Friday morning the Trades Union Congress announced that it was postponing its upcoming congress, set to begin on September 11.

The unions' actions provoked a furious response from their members.

One postal worker replied to a CWU tweet dated September 10 reporting that as "Postal workers stood down strike action yesterday", management continued their propaganda offensive against the workforce, writing, "Yeah a lot didn't want to stand down, it was imposed on us like that 2% pay rise. Scab like behaviour whoever made that decision."

On Facebook, a CWU union official boasted of how quickly the union bureaucracy had swung into action to call off the strike writing, "Within 50 minutes of the Queen's passing, our executive had met, the decision was taken..."

A postal worker commented, "But they have already docked our wages for two days," while one wrote,

“RM hasn’t cancelled its cuts to real pay. An extra day’s work is a nice gift to the shareholders, shows no respect for your members who are being attacked ruthlessly.”

Another said, “Less than 24 hours’ notice and our pay has already been deducted. Wrong decision and you’re starting to sound like Royal Mail.”

One responded, “Can see a high count of ‘No confidence’ in the union after this. Should have just cancelled the pickets!!” and one wrote, “Pathetic, union fees will be cancelled.”

Responses to the RMT included, “Are the attacks on workers’ rights being suspended also?”

“Sat in a messroom full of railway workers and their livid about this. Have the Tories stopped its attack on the workforce?”

“What, or who, does this serve? Was the queen known for being a longstanding supporter of transport workers? Why screw over your members on her account?”

Another replied, “I’m an RMT member who is absolutely livid about this. It will remove all the momentum and activity we have built up.”

One tweeted, “Deepest condolences?? [RMT leader] Mick Lynch mentioned [socialist] Jim Connolly as a hero. JC rightly **rejected** the monarchy and said, ‘a people mentally poisoned by the adulation of royalty can never attain to that spirit of self-reliant democracy necessary for the attainment of social freedom’.”

Such was the backlash that the RMT was forced to take its initial tweet down within a few hours. In another attempt at damage limitation, a September 9 RMT letter to members signed by Lynch confirmed that the strikes had been called off—“As you may have seen by now,”—while giving no reason for doing so.

The union bureaucracy was aided and abetted by the pseudo-left Socialist Party, which has members at local, regional and national level of several unions and prides itself on its intimate relationship with the union apparatus. Socialist Party member Jared Wood is a member of the RMT National Executive Committee which took the decision to call off the strikes. The *Socialist* newspaper has not published a word on the queen’s death, let alone issued a word of criticism of the RMT and CWU. The same is true of their Facebook and Twitter accounts.

The unions only called strikes this summer in

recognition of the growing anger of millions of workers which they feared could not be held back except by authorising limited action. Their response to the monarch’s death underscores the Socialist Equality Party’s call for the working class to take these struggles out of the hands of the trade union apparatus through the formation of a network of rank-and-file-committees. We call on workers who want to do so to contact the SEP today.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact