

Strike cancellation provokes workers' fury as UK's Royal Mail declares war

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On Sunday, Communication Workers Union (CWU) officials unilaterally cancelled six days of strikes due to start Wednesday, capitulating to legal threats from Royal Mail. One day later, the company unveiled sweeping attacks on employment contracts that it will start imposing from tomorrow.

Royal Mail presented a revised below-inflation offer of 7 percent over two years at ACAS conciliation talks on Monday. The two-year de facto pay cut is dependent on accepting productivity measures that will transform Royal Mail employees into a low-wage Uber-style workforce.

In a press statement issued today at 3pm, the CWU advised, "Not only is the offer not applicable to Parcelforce and fleet employees, but the company have confirmed that as of tomorrow, new entrants will be brought in on lower terms, and will be introducing owner-drivers into Royal Mail – a service that will be comparable to Uber.

"There are also proposals to close mail centres, with wholesale site closures being mooted part of an overall programme, and changes to Sunday working."

Royal Mail's announcement has blown the CWU's corporatist strategy out of the water. CWU General Secretary Dave Ward and Assistant General Secretary Terry Pullinger have repeatedly insisted—all evidence to the contrary—that Royal Mail can be pressured by limited strike action to reach a negotiated settlement.

At a mass meeting called by CWU officials on Sunday to announce the cancellation of strikes on November 2, 3, 4, 8, 9 and 10, Ward and CWU Acting Deputy General Secretary Andy Furey suggested their cancellation would have a positive effect of concentrating attention on 10 days of talks with Royal Mail at ACAS.

The CWU's abject capitulation before Royal Mail—it

did not even issue a legal challenge to the company's anti-strike tactics—was the green light for Royal Mail bosses to commence a frontal onslaught on postal workers that amounts to a declaration of war.

On Sunday, the CWU's decision to cancel strikes provoked fury among 15,000 Royal Mail workers who attended the union's online "update" meeting. The meeting was a travesty. CWU officials ensured that members had no say, despite having delivered a massive 98 percent strike vote.

Ward told members that CWU officials had pulled strikes after legal threats from company lawyers on Friday. Royal Mail had challenged "the information that was served on the notices for the strikes..."

"After consulting with our own lawyers on what Royal Mail's lawyers have put to us, the postal executive met this morning and we've agreed to withdraw these notices for strike action. So that will be no strike action over the next two weeks."

At no point did Ward or Furey explain the legal basis for Royal Mail's challenge. Neither did the CWU set out the legal advice provided by their own lawyers, despite citing this as their reason for cancelling strikes. Royal Mail has also remained tight-lipped, stating it had written to the CWU "to highlight numerous material concerns with the formal notification of planned rolling strike action."

Ward continued, "I completely understand why our members may be disappointed, frustrated, and angry in some cases. But you need to recognise that when you serve notice on functional action, the level of information that we have to provide to the employer... always puts us at more risk than a normal 24-hour or 48-hour strike."

Ward's announcement unleashed a torrent of anger. The chat screen filled with hundreds of messages

denouncing the CWU as a “shambles”, “amateurs” and the “shittiest union going”. Others wrote, “embarrassing”, “farce”, “bottled it”, “bullshit” and “you only had one job”. “Should have a week’s strike” was a common response, along with “another sellout”, “I want to cancel my membership”, “union bent over and took it from behind again”, “all out [on strike] for F***’s sake” and “These guys are in bed with the Tories”. “Thompson [CEO] must be having an absolute laugh watching this” wrote one Royal Mail worker, while another demanded of the union’s top officials, “hang your heads in shame”.

The CWU’s Head of Communication Chris Webb who chaired the meeting was forced to acknowledge the scale of anger, “I can already see loads of comments saying the union’s cocked this up, [that] this is a massive mess-up from the union, why have we done this again, why do I pay my dues? Andy, I think it’s probably worth you coming in and maybe giving some background and what the true case is.”

Furey tried to defend the union’s actions, claiming it was “always going to be difficult” to avoid mistakes, “one small technical error can throw the action into jeopardy and the responsible thing for the union to do was to pull the action for the next two weeks, pick ourselves up, regroup and go again.”

He made clear the CWU regarded the strikes’ cancellation as a positive good, “As Dave [Ward] has said, we will be able to focus and concentrate on 10 days of talks at Acas. We’re back tomorrow morning. Look, the reality here is we want to negotiate a deal that deals with pay and change. The strikes are not the objective. The objective is an agreement. The strikes are designed to put pressure on the company to behave more reasonably in those negotiations.”

Royal Mail CEO Simon Thompson has demonstrated from the start that the company has no intention of behaving “reasonably”. He did not even bother to attend today’s ACAS talks. He is pursuing a strategy on behalf of shareholders aimed at shattering workers’ pay and conditions, placing the company on a competitive footing with Amazon and other global logistics giants.

More than 115,000 postal workers have joined eight days of strikes since August, equivalent to more than 1.2 million strike days. Royal Mail workers are at the forefront of a strike wave begun by rail workers in

summer. But this movement, with the power to paralyse the entire capitalist economy, is being suppressed by union bureaucrats colluding with corporate management and the Johnson-Truss-Sunak government.

Ward, Pullinger and other CWU officials, heavily promoted as “left-wing” and “militant” by pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Party and Socialist Workers Party, function as HR executives for the company. Even now, they are on their knees offering an “alternative business plan” to help Royal Mail boost profits and facilitate restructuring, just as they did in last year’s Pathway to Change agreement.

The struggle is at a crossroads. The CWU has announced a mass meeting for tomorrow (Tuesday, November 1) at 7pm, but Royal Mail workers must take the initiative. It is necessary to break the grip of the CWU bureaucrats by electing rank-and-file strike committees in every workplace, drawing up a log of claims and demanding all-out strike action to defeat Royal Mail’s plans.

This fight against Royal Mail is a political struggle against a Tory government preparing to invoke draconian anti-strike laws, backed by Sir Keir Starmer’s Labour Party opposition. Postal workers cannot win in isolation. Rank-and-file committees must reach out to rail workers, port workers, BT workers, National Health Service workers and teachers, raising the demand for a general strike to defeat the austerity onslaught on jobs, conditions and pay. Such a fight would win support from workers across Europe and internationally.

The demand must be raised for the nationalisation of Royal Mail, the seizure of its vast profits and its conversion into a public utility under the democratic control of the working class. We urge Royal Mail workers who agree with this fight to contact the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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