

# Communication Workers Union officials go cap-in-hand to shareholders as UK's Royal Mail declares war

Laura Tiernan  
2 November 2022

*Are you a Royal Mail worker who would like to share your views or other information on the dispute? Please get in touch. Your anonymity will be protected.*

On Tuesday night more than 28,000 Royal Mail workers joined the largest mass meeting ever called by the Communication Workers Union (CWU) after the company unveiled plans to slash thousands more jobs, introduce new employment contracts and destroy conditions and pay across all Royal Mail divisions.

Royal Mail's revised "offer" was presented to the CWU during the first day of ACAS conciliation talks on Tuesday. Less than 48-hours earlier, the CWU's postal executive had cancelled eight days of strikes after unspecified legal threats from Royal Mail over balloting technicalities.

At a meeting on Sunday, Ward had countered workers' anger over the CWU's strike cancellation, claiming its decision would allow officials to focus on ACAS talks, "It has been hard to focus on the negotiations when you're also out on strike. Sometimes that isn't always helpful."

CWU officials presented their plan at last night's meeting to "change the dynamics of the dispute" and "up the ante". But General Secretary Dave Ward and Acting Deputy General Secretary Andy Furey made clear the CWU executive is on its knees to Royal Mail shareholders.

CWU's Head of Communications Chris Webb ran the 40-minute stage-managed event—a Q&A session with Ward and Furey. Webb said of Royal Mail's diktats, "metaphorically [they] have their hands around our members' throat", and asked Ward if strikes on November 12 and 14 were enough, "are the union going to call more strike action that matches the attacks on our members and on this union?"

Ward claimed the CWU was escalating action, but in the next breath announced it was ditching two all-out strikes on November 12 and 14. These would be replaced by 48-hour strikes on November 24-26 (Black Friday) and November 30-December 2 (following Cyber Monday).

Ward's announcement provoked a deluge of angry comments in the livestream chat, including: "Cancelling 2 more strike days is showing weakness to RM [Royal Mail]", "Listen to your members! Reinstate the strikes on 12th and 14th!! You're playing into their hands", "So our last strike was 25th October and the next one is now 24th Nov...!!! upping the ante the union has said...1 whole month without any action", "Seems a large percentage of our members want strike dates reinstated 12th and 14th. The Top table need to explain to the membership why".

This morning on ITV's *Good Morning Britain*, Furey said the union's strike-ditching was "a tactical decision to try and have a period of calm reflection to allow for negotiations." He echoed Ward's statement that "the whole point of this is to focus everybody's attention now on the need to negotiate a settlement... it also gives Royal Mail the opportunity to start negotiating properly with the union."

Royal Mail is not engaged in negotiations let alone backing down. Its demands, outlined at the meeting, include Parcelforce and fleet staff being hired as owner-drivers, all new recruits hired on inferior pay and conditions, outsourcing, increased hours, Sunday working on normal pay rates, reduction of sick pay, new delivery model including removal of 5pm last letter time, invasive monitoring of delivery staff, attendance reviews with automatic warnings, and closure of mail centres with thousands more redundancies.

Furey said acceptance of Royal Mail's claims would amount to a "surrender document". Yet he and Ward

proceeded to declare that members would be balloted on the offer, wasting valuable time while Royal Mail proceeds with its corporate vandalism. On October 24, the company lifted its cap on owner-drivers at Parcelforce and sent threatening letters to staff there on Monday.

Ward announced a corporate charm offensive. The CWU executive would invite “all major shareholders to a meeting with the union” at which they would explain that Royal Mail’s losses are “down to mismanagement”. Royal Mail workers are being asked to participate in this charade with a CWU ballot calling for a vote of no confidence in CEO Simon Thompson. As if replacing one financial parasite with another will change anything.

After CEO Rico Back was sacked in May 2020, Terry Pullinger had claimed the union was in a “strong position” to “work with the board, with whoever the new people are.” Pullinger and Ward proceeded to negotiate the corporate Pathway to Change agreement and are begging for a similar deal today.

Ward told last night’s meeting, “We will explain to the shareholders that the CWU is up for change, and we will put forward our plan for change with the shareholders at that meeting.” For months, CWU officials have refused to inform their own members what their pay claim is, or what “change” the union deems acceptable. But they will present their “alternative business plan” first to Thompson, and then to a meeting of majority shareholders!

For Ward (salary package £144,635) and the union’s national executive, the current dispute boils down to an appeal that Royal Mail should continue its partnership with the CWU to bring about a return to profitability. Ward told the meeting, “I think you will see that this debate about the union not [being] up for change, we’ll wipe that off the table completely.”

With industrial action suppressed until the end of this month, the CWU has announced a campaign of letter writing to MPs and an Early Day Motion in parliament urging Royal Mail to negotiate with the CWU. A toothless Early Day Motion last year against “Fire and Rehire” was supported by just 43 out of 199 Labour MPs.

At last night’s meeting, the CWU was again forced to acknowledge the scale of workers’ anger, with Webb reporting “loads of members” posting comments opposed to its cancellation of strikes, “People [are] saying the union’s bottled it, we’re surrendering, we’re giving up to Royal Mail.” In reply, Ward and Furey doubled down, insisting the union had a “wider plan” and a “rounded

strategy”, while arrogantly cautioning workers, “we will win this dispute providing we don’t get too emotional, too angry, that we’re calm and measured, and we have a proper plan.”

In his 1998 essay, “Why are trade unions hostile to socialism”, *World Socialist Web Site* International Editorial Board Chairman David North explained the roots of the unions’ opposition to militant struggle, “Standing on the basis of capitalist production relations, the trade unions are, by their very nature, compelled to adopt a hostile attitude toward the class struggle. Directing their efforts toward securing agreements with employers that fix the price of labour-power and determine the general conditions in which surplus-value will be pumped out of the workers, the trade unions are obligated to guarantee that their members supply their labour-power in accordance with the terms of the negotiated contracts. As Gramsci noted, ‘The union represents legality, and must aim to make its members respect that legality.’

“The defence of legality means the suppression of the class struggle. That is why the trade unions ultimately undermine their ability to achieve even the limited aims to which they are officially dedicated.”

Royal Mail workers must intervene and put a halt to the union’s sabotage of their fight. Rank-and-file strike committees should be elected at all workplaces to draw up plans to secure the total defeat of Royal Mail’s ruthless corporate restructuring plans and win an inflation-busting pay raise.

With railway, port workers, BT and other workers already in dispute, the conditions exist for a combined offensive. The demand must be raised for the nationalisation of Royal Mail, the railways, ports and other basic infrastructure, with the profits of major shareholders seized and put to socially useful purposes under the democratic control of the working class.

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