

Socialist Party/Socialist Workers Party police mounting opposition to CWU capitulation before UK's Royal Mail

Tony Robson
6 November 2022

Britain's two main pseudo-left groups, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and Socialist Party (SP), are scrambling to shore up the authority of the Communications Workers Union (CWU) bureaucracy in the face of mounting opposition to its capitulation before Royal Mail.

In opposition to an enforced pay award of just 2 percent and the implementation of "gig economy" style terms and conditions by Royal Mail, 115,000 postal workers have taken eight days of national strike action. But this resistance is being sabotaged by the CWU bureaucracy.

CWU General Secretary Dave Ward is touted as a "left" leader by the pseudo-left. But he and the union bureaucracy rolled over to the legal threat against strike action by Royal Mail last Friday. The CWU Postal Executive announced Sunday its decision to cancel six days of rolling strike action due to start on Wednesday, for a fortnight, even though they reported the threatened legal action was based upon a technicality regarding informational notification.

This was followed by a cancellation of two further strikes dates on November 12 and 14 and an agreement to put the pay-to-change award outlined by Royal Mail on Tuesday to a vote. In addition to the 2 percent imposed, this constitutes a 7 percent award over two years, another de facto pay cut. Even this is tied to a raft of productivity strings and concessions which the company has already begun imposing.

Around 6,500 workers at its Parcelforce division were excluded from even the paltry additional award. Royal Mail announced it would press ahead with the increase of owner drivers and new entrants on lesser terms, as well as outsourcing of the Fleet maintenance division.

The SWP have been forced to acknowledge the widespread anger of postal workers, but only as a warning to the CWU bureaucracy to which they make their appeal. The *Socialist Worker* article October 31, "Royal Mail bosses go on attack after 'legal threat' saw strikes called off" is subheaded, "CWU leaders should meet bosses threats with escalation."

The article, updated from when it first appeared, reported that within 24 hours of its own appeal, rather than an escalation the CWU leaders had pulled the strike action on November 12 and 14!

"After a series of announcements about strikes being on then off, the union announced on Tuesday that it was calling two 48-hour

strikes for all Royal Mail workers. They are scheduled for Thursday 24 November and Friday 25 November, and then Wednesday 30 November and Thursday 1 December."

Instead of calling on postal workers to oppose their demobilisation by the CWU apparatus, an apologia follows stating that "The CWU added that it would later be confirming a further programme of December action. There has to be massive escalation to confront the declaration of war from Royal Mail. The best response would be all-out action."

Everything is left in the hands of a bureaucracy dedicated to suppression not escalation of strike action.

At two online meetings attended by tens of thousands of postal workers on October 30 and November 1, postal workers expressed outrage over the CWU Postal Executive cancelling strikes. At Tuesday's meeting, attended by 28,000 postal workers, Ward duly adopted the empty rhetoric of escalation after informing his members the strike action on November 12 and 14 had been withdrawn. But his claim that the 48 hour strikes on Black Friday and Cyber Monday was "upping the ante" was seen through by many postal workers who flooded the comments section demanding the original strike dates be reinstated with additional action called.

The SWP's only comment on this was to quote the CWU's head of communications Chris Webb acknowledging that "many workers online had responded to the news with anger at the bosses and at the union leaders." In fact, such was the level of opposition that at one stage Webb had to direct the comments he was receiving to Ward by asking Ward his response to members who were saying "the unions' bottled it, we're surrendering, we're giving up to Royal Mail."

In a further article Wednesday "Meet Royal Mail bosses attacks with all-out strikes not retreat", the *Socialist Worker* notes these comments but presents them as the result of anger and "confusion." Having offered no explanation for why a "rotten" deal was brought back by the executive, which CWU Acting Deputy General Secretary Andy Furey described as a "surrender document" the SWP continues to cover for its pro-corporate alliance.

It cites Ward explaining that strike action had been cancelled to promote a letter writing appeal to MPs and an approach to shareholders, but presents this as merely a misguided policy,

offering the advice that “rich shareholders aren’t interested in how the union would run the business if it was in charge.”

The SWP is silent on the Postal Executive’s alternative business plan, which promises increased competitiveness as the basis for its shareholder driven policy.

The SP is even more slavish in its defence of the CWU bureaucracy. *The Socialist* November 2 article, “Postal workers defiant as Royal Mail bosses run to the courts to block democratic action” also had to be hastily updated after initially reassuring postal workers the CWU was committed to further action on November 12 and 14.

The article references the two online meetings of postal workers without giving any clear indication of the groundswell of opposition to the union executive. Instead, the SP aligns itself de facto with these bureaucratic actions taken over the heads of postal workers and endorses the executive bringing back for a vote the pay-for-change agenda set out by Royal Mail.

The SP is forced to resort to a cynical apologia, writing once again as advisers to the CWU leaders claiming that “Where there was general agreement with this strategy, there were undoubtedly concerns, even anger and frustration that the two strike dates had been called off.” The SP suggests politely, “While it is reasonable to review tactics, there is a danger in putting action on and then parking it, especially after the union leadership had to react to Royal Mail’s legal challenge to the rolling functional action.”

The claim that the two-week strike action was suspended to protect the mandate for further action echoes the lies of the CWU executive and is disproven by its subsequent cancellation of action to push back further strikes.

The entire approach of the union bureaucracy is based on reassuring the major investors that it is only through its collaboration that postal workers resistance can be ended. The vote of no confidence in the chief executive Simon Thompson advocated by the CWU executive is based upon its commitment to restore the profitability they claim he has placed at risk.

The SP is silent on this corporatist agenda, having echoed the position of the bureaucracy that Royal Mail must return to the Pathway to Change (PtC). The agreement signed last year was based on productivity increases guaranteeing “change at a greater pace” through union-management cooperation to rebalance Royal Mail “from declining letters to a rapidly growing parcels market”.

The CWU has stated that there is nothing demanded by management which “could not be raised, discussed and negotiated via the various mechanisms, protocols and joint working groups provided within the existing agreement.”

To reinforce the position of the bureaucracy against CWU members, the SP proposes the creation of “a support group network.” It claims that this “will galvanise workers all over the country and show the support postal workers command. CWU branches should spearhead this, in conjunction with local trades councils and union bodies.”

This is coupled with a call on “the trade union movement” to organise a 24-hour general strike in which it is “also vital that the CWU takes the lead in calling for coordinated strike action across the private and public sectors, against brutal employers like Royal Mail and BT and their Tory political backers.”

The only co-ordination the CWU bureaucracy and its counterparts at the head of Britain’s major trade unions are engaged in is demobilising and dividing the working class. The Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) also announced the last minute cancellation on Friday of a series of three days of strikes by 40,000 rail workers at Network Rail and 14 train companies due to start on Saturday. RMT General Secretary Mick Lynch also cited “intensive negotiations” with the employers over the next two weeks. This follows the decision made earlier by the white collar TSSA union to withdraw strike action at Network Rail, and cancel four days of strikes at five train companies also due to have started Saturday.

The CWU’s own separation of the struggles at BT and Royal Mail have formed an essential part of this operation throughout the summer, helping to prop up a Conservative government rotting on its feet. At the Trades Union Congress, they all gave a standing ovation to Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer who stated, “I’m not just pro-business, I want to partner with business to drive Britain forward... And I will say the same about trade unions to the CBI [Confederation of British Industry].”

Royal Mail has since withdrawn its pay-for-change “offer”, signing a joint statement with the CWU executive for further talks at conciliation service ACAS until November 15. But this is based on CWU co-operation with the agenda for jobs losses and tearing up of terms and conditions. In Point 5 it states this is “To create space for constructive talks, both parties have committed to a de-escalation of tension to avoid flashpoints and restoring calmness in the workplace.” Ward and the executive have even abandoned their call for a vote of no confidence in the CEO Simon Thompson to facilitate talks at ACAS.

The opposition to the social looting of the financial and corporate parasites is bringing the working class into conflict with the bureaucratic apparatus of the unions, intent on securing their seat at the corporate table as an industrial police force. This includes the pseudo-left groups, which have many members comfortably ensconced in the bureaucratic apparatus.

To fight this the WSWS has urged:

“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.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact