

UK postal workers renew strikes against Royal Mail for decent pay and against restructuring

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Postal workers are set to renew their national strike action at Royal Mail this Thursday and Black Friday, with 115,000 due to walk out at 1,500 workplaces across the UK. It is the ninth day of strike action since August in a long-running struggle against low pay and company plans to tear up terms and conditions.

The privatised mail service has handed out £567 million to its shareholders this year, but now pleads poverty to demand a complete restructuring of the service. Royal Mail imposed a 2 percent pay award in June and announced last month plans to cut 10,000 jobs by next year—around 6 percent of its 150,000 workforce.

Royal Mail Chief Executive Simon Thompson announced half-yearly results for the company last Thursday, telling markets he would do “whatever it takes” to guarantee future profitability. In addition to confirming mass redundancies, he has doubled down on plans to create a low pay “gig-economy” workforce.

Thompson’s declaration of war against postal workers refuted claims made by Communication Workers Union (CWU) General Secretary Dave Ward that a negotiated settlement could be reached with the company. Talks at arbitration service ACAS over the past fortnight have been an exercise in how far the union was prepared to bend over backwards to accommodate Royal Mail.

The CWU cancelled eight days of strikes this month and signed a joint statement with Royal Mail on November 4 committing the union to a “de-escalation” of the dispute to “restore calmness in the workplace”. This served as the basis for Thompson to participate in talks for the first time with Ward and CWU Acting Deputy General Secretary, Andy Furey.

At online meetings joined by thousands of Royal Mail workers, the CWU postal executive tried to brush aside a storm of complaints that ACAS talks were a ploy and

their demands that industrial action be resumed and expanded. Workers’ warnings against the capitulation of the union bureaucracy have proved correct.

Postal workers at CWU gate meetings this week have been encouraged to conduct a vote of no-confidence in Thompson ahead of the strike. But it was Ward who boasted of having the chief executive in the room during ACAS talks, claiming just over a week ago to have the basis for a “good agreement.”

Calls for no-confidence votes in Thompson have been turned on and off by CWU officials. Their cynical claim that one arrogant and stupid boss is the source of the problem has been used to conceal the CWU’s own pro-business agenda. Earlier this month Ward announced a meeting of shareholders where the CWU will present its own “alternative business strategy”. The CWU has even called on the Tory government to step in and prevent the breakup and cherry picking of Royal Mail’s most profitable parts!

A chasm separates the interests of postal workers from the union bureaucracy, whose sole concern is their having been bypassed by the company as its industrial police force. The CWU’s top officials want to resume their partnership with Royal Mail, continuing the axing of jobs and productivity increases they have faithfully delivered since privatisation in 2013 through a series of corporatist agreements.

That is why the CWU bureaucracy has criticised the company for walking away from the Pathway to Change agreement signed last year. They have repeatedly assured Royal Mail there is nothing which cannot be achieved through union-management collaboration.

At an online meeting with postal workers last Thursday, Ward stated, “Even with the Pathway to Change agreement there would have been redundancies in our

industry... because that would have been linked to revisions activities because of the work falling off in letters and parcels.”

Furey followed this up, pointing to the Managing the Surplus Framework (MTSF) agreement used to implement job losses, stating that since 2002 “headcount has left the industry.”

Ward reported that Thompson had seen the union’s latest proposals to “manage” the redundancies on a voluntary basis and had described them as “fine”.

On this basis, Thompson was able to go before the markets and confirm the jobs cull. Emboldened by the union’s capitulation, Royal Mail announced a reduction in the terms of redundancy payments: from a maximum of 2 years and minimum of 6 months payment to 9 months and 6 weeks.

Even after Thompson delivered to the CWU on Saturday what the union describes as a “surrender document”, the union executive begged for the sham talks to be extended beyond the Monday 5pm deadline set by Thompson. The company document outlines a hit list on terms and conditions. The CWU has provided only a summary of the attacks, citing an ACAS confidentiality agreement against releasing the documents to postal workers.

CWU’s “counter proposal”

In a statement to postal workers this week, Ward and Furey set out the CWU’s counter proposals to Royal Mail. They stated, “We believe, and we know you will too, that our proposal is fair, would give both parties breathing space to reach a full agreement and would reward you for your outstanding contributions.”

The CWU’s counter proposal accepts the “pay for change” criteria demanded by the company, with pay directly linked to productivity strings. The counter proposal to the miserly 7 percent offer spread over 2 years is for “an improved 18 month pay deal for all grades”, equating to 8.5 percent. Proposed by Ward during ACAS negotiations, this is still less than two thirds the annual rate of inflation, with RPI at 14.1 percent.

Regarding Parcelforce, CWU made no counter proposal to Royal Mail’s plans, which it is already enforcing, to increase owner drivers to 33 percent and introduce further sweeping changes to work practices.

In response to ill health and sick pay being slashed by Royal Mail, the counter proposal is simply for “a joint review of our sick policies”. On revisions to rounds and increased workloads, it calls for “CWU Reps be fully involved and able to negotiate local revisions.”

The demand by management to remove Sunday premium is cited, but no counter proposal is put forward. Ward has already stated that he sees no problem in reaching an agreement over the introduction of Sunday as part of the normal working week, which is central to competing with rivals such as Amazon. The pretence that this will be “on a voluntary basis” and the CWU’s stated objection to the introduction of a “gig-economy” workforce has been exposed.

At last Thursday’s online mass meeting Ward stated that a settlement on Sunday working could include recognising the “company prerogative” to bring owner drivers in on lesser terms.

The strikes this week and across seven days in November-December have only been announced to convince Royal Mail that it must work through the CWU bureaucracy to stifle any further opposition. The ending of the dispute on the terms set out by the CWU would mean accepting the entire framework of sweatshop conditions demanded by Royal Mail.

The fight against Royal Mail is a political struggle against a Tory government preparing further anti-strike legislation, backed by Sir Keir Starmer’s Labour opposition. The demand for belt-tightening measures and the bonfire of terms and conditions to boost corporate profit must be rejected. Rank-and-file strike committees should be established at every depot to reach out to Post Office and BT/Openreach workers against the CWU’s role in blocking unified action.

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.



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