

UK postal workers strike as Royal Mail submits final offer demanding savage attacks

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Around 115,000 postal workers walked out nationally across 1,115 workplaces Thursday, on the first day of 48-hour strike action against the destruction of terms and conditions and pay restraint demanded by Royal Mail.

The dispute, which has seen eight previous days of strike action taken since late August, has intensified. The resistance of postal workers has grown in the face of repeated ultimatums from Royal Mail and its chief executive Simon Thompson to enforce low pay and sweatshop conditions on the 150,000 workforce.

Talks at the arbitration service ACAS between the company and the Communication Workers Union (CWU) over the past fortnight were the ploy that most postal workers suspected, with Royal Mail demanding outright surrender. The CWU leadership defied an outpouring of opposition from the rank and file over the cancellation of eight days of strike action earlier this month to promote the talks.

On the eve of this week's strike, Royal Mail presented to the CWU at ACAS talks what they have described as a "best and final offer". Thompson didn't even bother to attend. The offer consists of a revised pay proposal still massively below inflation and tied to the upending of long-established terms and conditions. The company demanded in return the withdrawal of all strike action and an agreement not to re-ballot on pay and conditions, or on the issue of mass redundancies referred to as "headcount reduction."

The enhanced offer consists of massaging the already tabled 7 percent pay rise over two years by reducing it to cover an 18-month period. The 9 percent includes the 2 percent rise already imposed, plus 3.5 percent for this year and 1.5 percent for 2023. The headline figure also includes a one-off bonus of £500 which is non-consolidated and conditional on productivity strings.

It only states that there will be no compulsory redundancies up to March 31, 2023, when this is reviewed. This is the halfway point of the 10,000 jobs losses already announced in October, meaning the company reserves the compulsory option. This figure is likely to be only the beginning, with reports that reductions of 30 percent are planned across parts of the company.

The pay offer is based on accepting a bonfire of terms and conditions demanded by Royal Mail, modelled on its "The Change we Need" document released in July. This is an all-embracing attack on what it described as "legacy benefits" to compete in its most profitable area, parcel deliveries, against rivals such as Amazon with pay and conditions to match.

Demands include flexibility of shifts patterns for "aligning resource to workload", reducing any work-life balance for postal workers who would be notified of changes in shift patterns between four and 10 weeks in advance. The seasonal hours would involve working less during the summer and more during the winter, meaning longer hours in the dark on deliveries. It includes flexibility over later start and finish times without any specified warning time, only "reasonable notice."

In relation to Sunday becoming part of the normal working week, the shift premium will be phased out over three years with new entrants hired based on mandatory Sunday working. The company will seek "alternative resourcing" if it is unable to achieve the Sunday working on a voluntary basis, meaning the use of owner drivers on inferior terms.

Sick pay would be slashed. After a second absence in a rolling 12-month period, the first three days would only be paid as statutory sick pay. Only on day four would company sick pay allowance apply. Statutory

Sick Pay is just £99.35 per week.

To oversee the new workplace regime, the document outlines the use of new technologies and data insight to monitor productivity “to support pro-active and positive performance review.”

The CWU Postal Executive formally rejected the ultimatum by Royal Mail and proceeded with strike action. But the role of the union leadership has been to demobilise postal workers, embolden the company and offer their own surrender terms.

At an online mass meeting of over 30,000 postal workers Wednesday evening, CWU General Secretary Dave Ward said that Royal Mail’s demands were “unacceptable” but continued that there “has to be a proper agreement which deals the with job losses, that deals with change.” He described the revised pay offer as “progress”, adding that if the 9 percent was backdated for all workers “we would probably recognise it as a decent offer and put it against change which is reasonable.”

The only reason Royal Mail can claim its revised offer contains any “improvements” is because of the concessions offered by Ward at ACAS. This includes using the window dressing of voluntary redundancies to begin the jobs cull and repackaging the miserly pay offer by reducing the period covered by the award.

In the face of the savage corporate restructuring, the postal executive has proposed an “alternative business strategy” based on utilising the “competitive advantage” Royal Mail has due to its deliveries to 32 million households per day. Ward has said he would be meeting shareholders next week to win support. The social parasites who have profited from £567 million in dividend pay outs are presented as saviours.

In a draft document containing its counter proposals to resolve the dispute, the CWU bureaucracy offers to sacrifice the terms and conditions of postal workers for a corporatist partnership with management.

It makes no reference to opposing the slashing of sick pay, stating that “the CWU remains committed to helping Royal Mail reduce the cost of absence” through a joint review looking at “workplace culture” and “training.” On seasonal shifts it states, “we have no in-principle objection to a reasonable form of seasonable variations with the caveat that this is 30 minutes per day.” On flexible shift times, while stating the union does not accept shifts without a start and finishing time

for delivery drivers, it states that the existing 30-minute flexing agreement “where workload dictates” could be “refreshed or indeed reinvigorated.”

Postal workers should reject the CWU’s demand to accept a “reasonable” sacrifice of their jobs, terms and conditions and appeals to the boardroom and shareholders. They should turn to their real allies among the broader sections of the working class such as rail and bus workers, teachers, university staff and nurses engaging in strike action against the Tory government, whom are all faced with the most brutal pay squeeze in generations.

This should start immediately by breaking the self-imposed isolation of the fight at Royal Mail by Ward and Acting Assistant General Secretary (Postal) Andy Furey. The union bureaucrats are sitting on a renewed mandate of 91.24 percent for strike action by around 1,400 CWU members at the Post Office. The government run service has offered no more than a 5 percent pay offer after six days of national strike action since May.

At BT/Openreach the CWU telecom executive has refused to name any further strikes by 40,000 telecom workers since their eighth day of national stoppages in late October against a below inflation pay award imposed in April of between 3 and 8 percent. CWU Assistant General Secretary Andy Kerr has been stalling telecom workers for weeks about the details of closed-door meetings held with the company.

A unified fightback can only be conducted through the establishing rank and file committees and mobilising the social power of the working class by expanding its struggles against the entire corporate and financial elite.



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