

UK post and rail strikes continue, as trade union bureaucracy steps up efforts to end wave of industrial action

Our reporters
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Postal workers completed a 48-hour UK-wide strike on Thursday, as rail workers began a two day national stoppage Friday.

The postal strike involves 115,000 workers who are demanding a pay increase, an end to attacks on working conditions and the withdrawal of a plan for 10,000 redundancies.

The rail stoppage involves 40,000 workers (20,000 signallers and maintenance workers at Network Rail and 20,000 workers striking 14 train operating companies). Rail staff are also demanding a pay increase, protection of their terms and conditions and an end to plans that would jeopardise safety standards across the network through the slashing of thousands of jobs.

The strikes are going ahead despite major efforts by the trade union bureaucracy to demobilise them.

With inflation running at over 14 percent, Communication Workers Union (CWU) leader Dave Ward has pleaded with Royal Mail for weeks that the union would be prepared to accept a pay deal of 9 percent—a real-terms cut. Acting Deputy General Secretary (Postal) Andy Furey said if this was offered, along with a worthless pledge for the “guarantee of no compulsory redundancies”, the CWU would end strikes.

Rail, Maritime and Transport union (RMT) officials, led by General Secretary Mick Lynch, spent the evening before Friday's strike in talks with Rail Minister Huw Merriman, Network Rail and the Rail Delivery Group. An RMT press release said that an agreement could not be finalised but that the minister requested further “all-industry talks” between the “RMT and the employers in order to find resolutions.” The RMT agreed to these discussions despite the government and employers refusing to budge an inch from their insistence that the workforce sacrifice their pay, conditions and jobs.

Following the talks, Lynch said, “Resolutions to disputes are about compromises. We understand what the companies

want and they understand what we need. So we need some compromise on some of the conditions they're putting on the offer and we'll need an improvement in the pay offer. That is achievable, in my view.”

On Friday Lynch said that in order to end the rail dispute, “We need to work quickly, and we need a bit of goodwill from all parties.”

As the RMT executive finalises its sellout, the Transport Salaried Staffs' Association (TSSA) and Unite unions completed their own at Network Rail. Last week the TSSA withdrew planned strike action in order to recommend a below-inflation deal—which the RMT has not yet signed up for—to its 2,500 members at Network Rail.

Seeing no opposition to the deal from the union and the bureaucracy's ongoing sabotage of a genuine united fightback that would mobilise the membership of all three rail unions, TSSA members voted to accept. It offers just 9 percent over this and next year. The lowest paid TSSA member will receive only an 11 percent pay increase.

Earlier in the week, Unite's membership at Network Rail also voted in favour of the deal, after strike action was withdrawn.

The rapidity with which the trade union bureaucracy is moving to extinguish strike after strike testifies to their status as an industrial police force for the ruling class. This week, University and College Union (UCU) General Secretary Jo Grady intervened to block all-out strike action in Higher Education as university staff sought to escalate their own fight over pay, conditions and pensions.

On Thursday, Unite cancelled a strike of more than 400 Heathrow Airport ground handlers employed by international aviation company Menzies.

The workers were due to take action in pursuit of higher pay for 72 hours from 4am on Friday. They had rejected a 4 percent pay offer backdated to May and a further 6.5 percent pay increase from January 2023, before Unite called off the strike hours before it was set to go ahead claiming it had

received an improved offer. No details have been made public about the deal, which is being put to a membership ballot.

WSWS reporters spoke to striking postal workers at Royal Mail sites around the UK during their two-day strike.

At the **Manchester Central Delivery Office** picket line, John said of the dispute after months of strike action, “They’ve given us nothing. They are offering us 9 percent in pay but that is over two years. And they say you can only get that if it’s agreed that Sundays are part of the normal working week, and changing our hours so we work later.

“I’ve been working here 16 years. It’s got to the point where what you are expected to do in the amount of time you have to do it is unmanageable. We’re just doing a lot more.

“They’re talking about redundancies, saying we are losing a million pounds a day, but we can’t do the job with the staff we have at the moment. There’s agency workers in there. It’s a race to the bottom, new starters are now on different conditions to us.

“They are leaning towards the stuff that makes the profit. If you look at the letter service, they are treating it as secondary. All they want to do is to make 30 people [on the board] very rich.

“One of the things they wanted to implement, and now they’ve railroaded it in, was that previously if you had to finish your walk by say over an hour longer, you could get paid for it. Now people will leave stuff in the centre here because beyond their shift finish time, they won’t be getting paid.

“Some of the stuff they wanted to bring in they started to do in the pandemic, like just parcel delivery on Saturdays. They did that for about three weeks.”

John said he thought the solution would be to force the resignation of Royal Mail CEO Simon Thompson, as “he is driving everything down”. This is the position of the CWU, who for their part are pleading with Royal Mail to see sense and appoint a more union friendly board that they can partner with in order to impose the attacks required on the workforce and be able to compete with competitors such as Amazon.

WSWS reporters responded that previously the CWU had insisted on the resignation of another CEO, Rico Back, and there was nothing to be gained in demanding a board amenable to defending workers’ conditions, when their sole priority was about piling up profits.

Another striker said “With it being a privatised company now and money is the key, I can’t see it [Thompson leaving and the situation improving for the workforce]. Someone else will just come with the same ideas. One bastard goes out and another will just come in. The idea of Royal Mail

just being a service has gone.”

On the picket line in **Aylesbury**, Chad said the strike was continuing due to “the changes Royal Mail want to implement. That is change to our start times, Sunday working, reductions in allowances.

“They want to get rid of as many long-term posties as they can on their protected terms and conditions and replace us all with agency staff or people who are having to work longer hours for less pay.

“The cost-of-living crisis is affecting absolutely everyone. Posties are not immune to that. Our rate of pay is well below that national average, even though we consider it a decent rate of pay, if we are looking at basic. But it is not enough for us under the current standard of living, with inflation running at the rate that it is, the cost of a loaf of bread, a pound of cheese, a bottle of milk. We are having to heat our houses, pay for our families, childcare—the cost of living is going up exponentially and we can’t cope with that.”

“The problem is also that we work for an employer that made profits that were out of this world through the pandemic, and we haven’t seen a penny of that. And now, while we were being hailed as heroes one minute, we are being treated worse than people working under gig economy contracts the next, so it is affecting us as much as everybody else.”

Chad is a member of the Labour Party and said of the opposition of party leader Sir Keir Starmer to strikes, “The simple fact is that the Labour Party should be for the working class and right now it doesn’t appear they are... I can’t say I am happy with the leadership, and we do need someone that is reflective of the working class, which I can’t say we have at this point in time.”



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