

Communications Workers Union strike re-ballot buys Royal Mail time to impose restructuring

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Around 115,000 postal workers in the Communications Workers Union (CWU) are re-balloting on strike action in their dispute with Royal Mail. The ballot opened on January 23 and will close on February 16.

Postal workers took 18 days of strike action from last July up to Christmas Eve, in the first national strike action since 2009, prior to privatisation.

Royal Mail announced in late November its “best and final offer” a derisory sub-inflation two-year pay deal of nine percent (including the two percent imposed initially and a £500 lump sum). Even this is conditional on the overhaul of terms and conditions, increased productivity and mass redundancies. The company is pressing ahead with its agenda, with postal workers reporting that workplace revisions were being implemented unilaterally from the start of the year.

Postal workers should vote Yes in the strike ballot, but they need an alternative to the failed corporatist and pro-business strategy of the CWU leadership under General Secretary Dave Ward.

Last summer, the CWU held two strike ballots of postal workers—the first in response to the imposed two percent award, when RPI inflation was standing at nearly 12 percent. There was an emphatic 97.6 percent vote for strike action on a 77 percent turnout.

Royal Mail had made clear that its original pay offer would be tied to ramped up exploitation and worth only “up to” 5.5 percent—still less than half the inflation rate. “We can only fund this offer by making the changes that will pay for it,” it stressed. The proposed deal was based on accepting transformation of the service into a rival with competitors such as Amazon. The 5.5 percent was then withdrawn, and the two percent without strings imposed in June.

The CWU deferred the fight over terms and conditions

to a second ballot on “Change”, which returned a larger mandate of 98.7 percent for strike action on a 72.2 percent turnout.

The CWU has prevented a joined-up fight by postal workers against this management offensive with alternate strikes on Pay and Change throughout last year. Action has been further undermined by cancellation of strikes in the face of legal threats and then their suspension so the CWU could get round the table with CEO Simon Thompson in November at the government conciliation service ACAS.

The entire process has been about how far the CWU would go to accommodate Royal Mail. This resulted in the final offer based on pitiful pay and linked to slashing sick pay, flexible start and finishing times, phasing in of Sunday working and workplace revisions aimed at thousands of job losses.

In October, Royal Mail said it must cut up to 10,000 jobs by August 2023 as part of restructuring including ending Saturday post deliveries as a competitor to gig economy parcel courier firms. Thompson said Royal Mail had spent £900 million “investing to compete in the parcels market,” and required “a change in working practices to compete in that hyper-competitive market.”

From the start of this year the CWU claimed that progress had been made since the final offer from Royal Mail, because management had announced there would be no compulsory redundancies. This will not defend a single job as many workers will feel compelled to take voluntary severance packages.

The company’s reinstatement of its industrial relations framework to include the CWU in “revision activity,” i.e., increased workloads, was seized on to suspend any further strike action and hold fresh talks between January 9 and 20.

This has been the overarching goal of the CWU bureaucracy behind all the bluster of opposing “unacceptable change.” In early December, Ward and Acting Deputy General Secretary (Postal) Andy Furey spoke at a rally of 15,000 postal workers. They had just come from three days of discussions with Royal Mail at ACAS.

Ward and Furey outlined a pro-business plan for Royal Mail’s continued profitability. Furey insisted that “Pay is fine, we can deal with pay.” The union said it rejected the 9 percent offer, but only because it breaks down as 9 percent on top of the imposed deal. Ahead of December’s rally, Ward told *Sky News* that “if it was a proper [!] 9 percent and if the change was the right change for our members, and crucially, for customers and the future of this company, then we would probably find a settlement on that figure,” i.e., 11 percent over two years in total.

Ward emphasised the CWU’s corporatist commitment, pledging that the union was “not just making demands without recognising the position that the company is in.”

Furey said, “If we were able to move forward onto a number of key areas including the guarantee of no compulsory redundancies, we said we would be able to support proper revisions, properly negotiated... We were prepared to work at pace to deliver those revisions.”

He told postal workers, “There is no need for *compulsory* redundancies whatsoever.” The company is looking to shed up to 10,000 jobs and Furey wants this done through voluntary redundancy. The CWU is demanding Royal Mail implement 2021’s Pathway to Change agenda—a corporatist agreement based on productivity increases on the parcel courier model.

Ward now even acknowledges “there are thousands and thousands more jobs at risk,” and has said the company was “waging war on the current workforce. Psychological warfare.” He has described a systematic campaign of intimidation by management with over 200 CWU reps and members suspended.

The decision to suspend strike action was widely condemned by posties.

On the CWU Facebook page, one wrote in relation to the renewed talks, “Intensive negotiations again?? What has everyone been doing for the last 6 months. We going to get shafted again.”

One worker called the CWU’s actions “criminal,” saying, “Perhaps it’s time to get rid of the executive and replace them! They have achieved NOTHING...”

Other comments raised that the suspension and re-ballot “gave Royal Mail a minimum of 3 months guaranteed

strike free to clear the backlog created at great financial cost to members in December.”

Ward told the *Daily Telegraph* in December, “The people who have created a crisis here, the CEO and a few handfuls of people on the board, the chair of the company, they have not got the knowledge or the ability to lead us out of that crisis.” The attempt to present the chief executive as a rogue element, with the slogan “Thompson Out”, is used in an attempt to secure an alliance with wealthy shareholders. At a meeting of investors on January 23, Ward declared the CWU’s unstinting support to develop “competitive advantage” and “grow revenues.”

Left to Ward and the CWU executive, posties face a repetition of the sell-out deal already agreed for 40,000 BT Group workers that ended a national strike last October after eight days of stoppages. The below-inflation settlement included a £3 billion cost-cutting programme.

Faced with rising discontent among postal workers, the CWU has announced a 24-hour strike from 12.30pm on February 16 to coincide with the closing of the strike re-ballot. The one-day stoppage is taken under the mandate for strikes over “Change” which expires that day. A press release stated, “The CWU has made every effort to avoid a resumption of hostilities,” complaining that Thompson had broken an agreement to abide by the Industrial Relation framework—meaning working with the bureaucracy to implement its cost cutting exercise.

Postal workers need to take this fight out of the hands of the CWU bureaucracy by building rank-and-file strike committees at all workplaces to draw up plans to defeat of Royal Mail’s ruthless corporate restructuring plans and win an inflation-busting pay raise.



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