

Communication Workers Union cancels strike action, bowing to Royal Mail legal threat

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The Communication Workers Union (CWU) has abandoned the 24-hour national strike by 115,000 postal workers it scheduled for February 16/17 in the face of threatened legal action by Royal Mail.

The CWU decision came on Monday after it received correspondence from Royal Mail Group's legal representatives challenging the industrial action. A statement to members from General Secretary Dave Ward and Acting Assistant Deputy Secretary (Postal) Andy Furey provides no explanation of Royal Mail's legal threat. An article in *HR Grapevine* cited "technical issues relating to the Dispute Resolution Process and the lifespan of the existing Change ballot."

Yet again a technicality is being used to override workers' right to strike, further exposing the draconian nature of government anti-strike legislation which the CWU will not challenge.

The planned stoppage, across February 16 and 17, was announced February 3. It was based on a mandate for strike action from a members' ballot in August last year against changes to working practices. This covered action up to and including February 17, which coincides with the closing of another strike ballot for renewed action for a further six months. The climbdown by the CWU will hand Royal Mail time to impose its attacks, as strike action can only resume in March.

The August strike ballot over "Change" produced a 98.7 percent majority on a 72.2 percent turnout and has formed the basis for national strike action over 18 days until last Christmas Eve. This also included action over wages mandated by a strike ballot in July, after Royal Mail originally imposed a pay award of 2 percent last June, withdrawing a rejected 5.5 percent offer including productivity strings.

Postal workers had been demanding further strikes based on the August mandate as Royal Mail proceeded with changes unilaterally after announcing its "best and

final offer" at the end of November. This consisted of just 9 percent over two years, including the original 2 percent and a £500 lump sum. The derisory pay offer was made conditional on cuts and speed-ups.

The revisions in postal rounds to increase workloads form part of the restructuring agenda, including measures to increase productivity and the largest single overhaul of terms and conditions. This was announced last year in "The Change We Need". Royal Mail stated this was to reset "legacy benefits" to compete with the benchmark set by rivals such as Amazon in the parcel delivery sector, its most profitable arm.

The CWU leadership under Dave Ward has faced growing criticism for re-entering talks with management with postal workers overwhelmingly opposed to the deal. The CWU Postal Executive's agreement to suspend strike action has tied workers' hands while the company proceeds with its restructuring agenda, including 10,000 redundancies by August this year.

At no stage did the union hierarchy consult the membership about mounting a challenge to Royal Mail in court. Ward and Furey's statement reports that the Postal Executive met over the weekend and "Having discussed this with our lawyers, they advised that we could defend our position."

As the reason for not challenging Royal Mail in the courts, they cited legal advice that "given the laws in this country are heavily weighted against working people, the risks of losing in court may potentially impact on the re-ballot—we cannot simply allow this [to] happen."

After acknowledging how unjust the anti-strike laws are, the CWU presents this as an unchallengeable fact. The CWU has suppressed strike action in its attempts to find common ground with a company which is at war with its workforce. This has meant that a key contingent of workers has been excluded from strikes and protests against the Sunak government's Strikes Bill.

Ward's justification of surrender, on the grounds that it protects the status of the strike re-ballot, is deeply cynical. As the CWU statement goes on to explain, Ward and Furey have re-entered talks even while the company presses ahead with its attacks. In October, it had responded with a similar undignified climbdown, bowing to legal threats and cancelling six days of rolling strike action, again without specifying the grounds of Royal Mail's challenge.

As postal workers have commented on the CWU Facebook page:

- "Absolutely embarrassing, exactly what Royal Mail wants."
- "Every time RMG [Royal Mail Group] threatens court action, the CWU bottle it! It's getting boring now. Sort it out CWU and grow a pair."

The union executive has repeatedly shown it is prepared to override mandated strike action to find an accommodation with management, even without any legal threats. In November, Ward and Furey suspended eight days of strike action when chief executive Simon Thompson had agreed to attend the arbitrations services at ACAS.

The CWU then signed a joint statement with Royal Mail based on a "de-escalation" of the dispute, with Ward saying that a "new dynamic" had been created. Postal workers' criticisms that this was a ploy were dismissed as anger erupted at an online meeting of 15,000 complaining of a sellout.

The outcome of the "new dynamic" was to allow the company to go on the offensive again with its "final offer". Faced with continued opposition from postal workers, the CWU executive wound down action in the New Year, helping the company to clear the postal backlog.

Ward committed the CWU to "intensive negotiations" between January 9 and 20. It suspended strike action and boosted Royal Mail's supposed commitment to no compulsory redundancies. But the CWU's overriding concern is to ensure the company reinstates the "industrial relations" framework, and involve the union in "revision activity", i.e., the plans to increase workloads.

In its statement on the action, the CWU states openly it had made an "effort to end the resumption of hostilities" based on "re-engagement in revisions at local level" to "resolve any disagreements over savings targets."

The belated announcement of strike action on Feb 16/17 was intended as a face-saving exercise after this collusion between the CWU and Royal Mail was used as a rod for

postal workers' backs and under conditions in which 200 CWU reps and members have been suspended during the dispute.

The CWU seeks to conceal the fact that postal workers are up against an offensive which is ultimately directed by the government.

The union presents Royal Mail as a cherished national institution going back 500 years. This led to the absurd scenes last December with Ward leading a protest to Buckingham Palace to petition King Charles III.

The union bureaucracy portrays the dispute as a conflict with RMG chief executive Simon Thompson, while seeking to ingratiate itself with investors with an alternative business plan. Ward spoke at a meeting of investors on January 23, declaring the CWU's unstinting support to develop "competitive advantage" and "grow revenues."

What a "successful" outcome of the dispute would like for Ward is clear from the sellout he endorsed at BT Group (Openreach) last year, agreeing a below inflation pay deal to end national strike action by 40,000 telecom workers after eight days. BT CEO Philip Jansen gloated that the deal paved the way to "lean into" £3 billion cost savings, describing the CWU as "vital partners".

Royal Mail clawed out huge profits from the pandemic, shovelling over £500 million to shareholders and investors. Company chair Keith Williams then declared that the "pandemic boom" was over, requiring Royal Mail create a new benchmark for exploitation to guarantee future profits.

Throughout last year, postal workers have demonstrated their determination to fight in their first national strike action since the privatisation of Royal Mail a decade ago. The Socialist Equality Party and World Socialist Web Site have urged workers to form rank-and-file committees to take the struggle out of the hands of the CWU bureaucracy. In the fight against restructuring, postal workers should raise the demand for the nationalisation of Royal Mail, the seizure of its ill-gotten gains and its conversion into a public utility under the democratic control of the working class.



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