

Communication Workers Union deepens collusion with Royal Mail to prepare strike sell-out

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The seven-month struggle of 115,000 postal workers against restructuring by Royal Mail is being sabotaged by the Communication Workers Union (CWU).

After 18 days of strike action since last August against an imposed sub-inflation pay award of 2 percent, demands for the tearing up terms and conditions and plans for 10,000 redundancies, postal workers returned a 96 percent vote for strike action in the re-ballot last month.

Since receiving the renewed mandate on February 16, General Secretary Dave Ward and Acting Deputy General Secretary (Postal) Andy Furey have sat on the opposition.

Ward and Furey re-entered negotiations with Royal Mail overseen by the arbitration service ACAS, which have produced a blueprint for suppressing strike action and paving the way for increased workloads and reduced staffing levels.

Last Thursday, the CWU produced a joint statement with Royal Mail proclaiming the union was totally aligned with the interests of the company “to minimise the current tensions across the Royal Mail Group workplaces in the long lasting dispute” and to reach a settlement by March 12.

The union now accepts the company’s pleading poverty, dropping previous references to the more than £500 million doled out to its investors and shareholders over the last year.

The March 2 joint statement reads, “Both parties recognise that the business faces the most seriously challenging financial, economic and market conditions in its history and that the best way to meet these challenges is to reach a national agreement that aligns the interests of all, including the workforce, customers and key stakeholders, in building a positive future for Royal Mail Group.”

The CWU has faced mounting criticism from postal

workers for refusing to organise strike action this year, committing to “intensive talks” even as the company pushed ahead with local revisions to working practices through executive action. These revisions are part of the scorched earth restructuring policy demanded by Royal Mail, including cutting deliveries and collections and creating fewer but longer routes relying on back-breaking productivity increases.

Instead of executive action by the company, its programme will now be implemented jointly with the CWU. The appendix to the Joint Statement, under the subheading “RMG and CWU Re-engagement on Joint Revision Activity”, states, “These revisions are designed to align hours to workload and improve productivity, recognising that there has been significant overall volume decline.”

Through the joint company-union Industrial Relations Framework, the CWU has pledged to complete the cost-cutting exercise by the end of the financial year in April, such is its commitment to boosting profitability at postal workers’ expense.

Job losses as productivity is ramped up are accepted, with the usual caveat, “There will be no Compulsory Redundancies arising from any of these revisions. Any Voluntary Redundancies will be carried out on a seniority basis...”

The Joint Statement also allows for postal workers’ lives to be determined by Royal Mail’s business requirements, demanding punishing new work schedules with changes in start and finishing times “subject to local agreement.”

Workers are disgusted at the CWU’s collusion with Royal Mail. Among the many angry comments on the union’s Facebook page are:

“Everything we have voted to strike against will be

fully implemented by the time this deadline is reached. I'm really not sure who I'm more disappointed with the company or the union."

"Getting sick of the union now going on about the company's finances... it's not US posties that gave millions and millions away is it.. I don't care about the company's finances I care about the hard working posties who are struggling to pay bills, food and other stuff.."

"Openreach BT same thing, went on strike for a pathetic rise. Those up the top rinse the firm dry those who work at the bottom get sod all. The CWU did not fight [BT CEO Phillip] Jansen hard enough for us. Looks like they will do the same with RM [Royal Mail]."

The framework for strangling the dispute has been provided by the arbitration service. Former Trades Union Congress (TUC) leader Brendan Barber, now chair of ACAS, has had pride of place in overseeing the process.

With the role of the CWU bureaucracy as the company's industrial police force secured, the fate of some 300 union representatives and members who have been suspended or dismissed during the dispute has been left hanging. The Joint Statement defers the issue to an "independent review process".

An article on February 23 in the *Daily Mirror* reported that disciplinary cases had been launched by Royal Mail on such flimsy grounds as workers' use of the word "scab", either on the picket line or social media. This speaks to the climate of intimidation Royal Mail has created to undermine the staunch support for national strike action—the first since privatisation in 2012. Three ballots have easily cleared the legal thresholds set by anti-strike legislation.

Last month the company threatened legal action to prevent a strike on February 16/17 which the CWU caved in to, as it did to a similar threat last October, withdrawing six days of action.

At an online CWU meeting March 2, intimidation meted out by Royal Mail was acknowledged by Furey who gave the example of 29 postal workers at a delivery office in Redcar facing fact-finding disciplinary meetings relating to a walk-out over attendance patterns and the imposition of a revision. Rather than condemning the victimisations outright, he advised Royal Mail to "Be clever, box clever now. Don't make an already bad situation worse. Let's put these into the independent process..."

The CWU is concerned that draconian measures taken to make an example of postal workers would inflame the opposition it is seeking to tamp down and jeopardise the

sellout deal it is committed to delivering to end the dispute.

At the same meeting, Ward stated that the CWU would have been prepared to bring back the 9 percent two-year deal offered by company if it had been backdated to last April. He added that the union would be seeking an award to cover a longer pay period, which would be used to boost the headline figure of the sub-inflation pay agreement it has already indicated it will insist workers swallow.

With its acceptance of accelerated demands for revisions to boost profitability and refusal to mount a principled defence of victimised postal workers, the CWU is running up the white flag. The tone has been set for the settlement on pay and restructuring it is seeking to reach by March 12.

Ward's endless references to the company's "financial difficulties" are designed to push acceptance of the sweatshop charter demanded by the company to compete with its major rivals in the parcel delivery market. As long as the changes are not imposed unilaterally but implemented against workers via co-operation with the bureaucracy, the CWU will sign off on Royal Mail's stated aim of ending "legacy benefits" and driving terms and conditions down to a benchmark set by Amazon.

Postal workers must begin organising to stop the union bureaucracy carrying out this betrayal. This means taking the dispute into their own hands through the establishment of rank-and-file committees which can act against the backroom negotiations and the joint company-union apparatus.

The cornerstone of any genuine fight is a rejection of the claims of shared interests between postal workers and the privatised company and its rampant profiteering. A programme for converting Royal Mail into a public utility under the democratic control of the working class and seizing the vast profits given to shareholders would win widespread support among millions of workers facing similar demands from their employers for belt-tightening and the giving up of terms and conditions to boost corporate profits.



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