

Communication Workers Union mass meeting paves way for rotten sellout

Ward and Furey reject strike action, claiming deal with Royal Mail “within reach”

Laura Tiernan
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Thursday night’s online mass meeting called by the Communication Workers Union (CWU) to “update” members on the Royal Mail dispute was an insult to tens of thousands of postal workers in Britain engaged in a determined eight-month fight to defend their livelihoods.

CWU bureaucrats claimed a deal could be reached “within days”, concealing the content of their extensive talks with Royal Mail executives beneath a deluge of empty verbiage.

CWU officials called the meeting to stem mounting anger over the union’s refusal to call strikes to defeat Royal Mail’s escalating attacks. In the early hours of Wednesday morning, Royal Mail executives announced company-union talks were over, unveiling a provocative “final offer” that builds on draconian workplace revisions imposed unilaterally in recent months with the complicity of the CWU.

Royal Mail has not given an inch. In place of its 9 percent “best and final” 18-month pay offer in November, which incorporated 2 percent imposed unilaterally last year, Royal Mail announced Wednesday a revised 10 percent offer over three years, with a one-off lump sum of £500 or £1,500 depending on the rate at which instalments are paid.

This pittance is tied to revised start times, pushing back shifts, with letter deliveries ending at 4.30pm. The company presents this as an act of generosity, with duties beginning 60-90 minutes later, starting from March 2024, “instead of our original proposal for everyone of 3 hours”. All of this is part of Royal Mail’s transformation into a parcel delivery service, gutting the Universal Service Obligation for letter delivery.

Royal Mail’s “offer” would also entrench a two-tier workforce, with new entrants on inferior terms. Sunday

working will remain voluntary and at premium rates for existing staff only. On job protection, it commits only to no “compulsory” redundancies. But hiking up exploitation through workplace revisions is already forcing out senior staff who are less physically able to withstand punishing workloads.

Despite Royal Mail’s bonfire of pay, terms and conditions, Furey reported the union’s postal executive had met on Wednesday and concluded, “it would be wrong at this juncture to take [strike] action when we are making progress.” Ward weighed in, attacking those who call for strikes “every other minute”, and declaring pompously, “At this point in time, we don’t believe that’s the right thing to do.”

All input and control by the membership was excluded. Dozens of postal workers posted messages in the meeting livestream, demanding industrial action, many invoking the overwhelming strike mandate delivered by members in February. But Webb assumed the role of self-appointed “spokesman” for the membership, selecting which questions to ask Ward and Furey, and attacking those who criticised senior officials.

Ominously, a central refrain was the need to “accept change” (a euphemism for pro-market restructuring). Ward stated, “Change was always a necessity in how we take this forward, and it always will be”. The Royal Mail dispute was “a Wapping moment” and a “miners’ dispute moment”, he declared, citing the 1984-85 miners’ strike and 1986-87 battle of Fleet Street printers against Rupert Murdoch’s News International, concluding, “The industry has got to change. And we believe that there is a way of making change happen. That it can help this company move forward, make it successful again, and that you can share in all the benefits of that.”

From these two most important industrial battles of the past forty years, Ward drew the conclusion that no serious fight must ever again be mounted against the employers. Instead change must be imposed by the unions themselves.

What will this mean for postal workers? In the 1980s, “change” was enforced against printers and miners via state repression, including the mass arrest and jailing of strikers, with the Trades Union Congress refusing to lift a finger in their defence. The outcome was the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs and the decimation of both industries. Ward now declares that a similar “success” at Royal Mail will be achieved via a pro-company agreement with the CWU that will supposedly “trickle down” to workers.

Ward and Furey spoke not as union leaders defending their members, but as management consultants lecturing on the inevitability of workplace reform and the desirability of industrial harmony, “We would love to work together with the management team. We would love to work together with you and turn the fortunes of this company around. That’s our objective and what we need is an agreement that does that.”

As the meeting progressed, angry comments from postal workers mounted. Ward’s references to Royal Mail’s “serious financial position”, “difficult economic conditions” and “pressures” drew ridicule and rebuke from poorly-paid workers. “RM are skint but still pay their management bonuses. Stop buying the company rhetoric, call the strike dates”, wrote one postal worker, while another commented, “Sadly you’ve now bought into the company are in dire financial straits policy to accept a poor deal.”

Furey said of (unstated) “sticking points” in the talks: “we have closed the gap considerably”. He revealed the CWU has a 30-page draft agreement with Royal Mail, adding that “the devil will be in the detail”. But officials made clear the draft agreement was none of their members’ business, ignoring calls from postal workers to publish its contents.

Despite vague claims about “progress” and “assurances” from the company, Ward made clear the CWU has agreed key planks of Royal Mail’s reform agenda, including annualised hours, seasonal variations, later start times, flexible shifts, and concessions to a two-tier workforce. These concessions drew a barrage of angry comments in the chat.

Disgracefully, Ward confirmed the CWU’s refusal to defend up to 400 postal workers, including local CWU

reps, victimised and sacked during the dispute. He stated, “Some people in the dispute unfortunately would have done things that were unacceptable” and declaring without a shred of evidence, “When people do things that cross the line, we’re not here to defend those people”. He indicated the CWU has agreed that the fate of victimised workers will be decided by an “independent review” of “their [Royal Mail’s] senior people”.

The CWU bureaucracy is preparing a massive betrayal at Royal Mail. This must be stopped by rank-and-file action. Ward and Furey hailed “back channel” discussions with Royal Mail since talks ended on Tuesday, stating, “We believe that there will be some further discussions, over perhaps the weekend or at the early part of next week.”

Furey addressed Royal Mail bosses directly, “Dave and I, and the other officers, are available to meet this weekend, both bank holidays, to get an agreement so that we can move forward. Move this industry forward to beat the competitors.”

On Sunday April 2, a meeting of postal workers convened by the Socialist Equality Party (UK) voted to establish a rank-and-file committee. Those in attendance heard from rank-and-file committees of postal workers in Australia and Germany, and a report from France on the historic strike wave against the Macron government. We urge Royal Mail workers to join the committee and help organise a genuine fightback against the assault on pay, terms and conditions and for the defence of all victimised workers.

E-mail: rmpw.rfc@gmail.com to contact and join the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact