

Canadian postal worker voices support for UK Royal Mail workers' fight against concessions-filled contract

A Canada Post mail carrier
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115,000 postal workers in Britain are currently being balloted on a sellout agreement reached between Royal Mail management and the Communication Workers Union (CWU). The deal includes the market-based restructuring of Royal Mail, massive attacks on pay and conditions, and plans for up to 10,000 job cuts. Postal workers delivered a massive 96 percent strike mandate as recently as mid-February, but this was overruled by the union leadership. It continued talks, then negotiated a concessions-filled tentative contract. Well aware of the seething opposition among posties, which has been expressed in the formation of the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee, the CWU is dragging out the balloting process as long as possible. The vote will only begin May 17 and is to conclude June 7.

The World Socialist Web Site received the following letter from a delivery worker at Canada Post declaring his solidarity with the British postal workers and explaining some of the issues he and his colleagues confront in the workplace.

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I am a postal worker in Canada, and I am proud to be counted among the many hardworking postal workers around the globe. I deliver letters and parcels from every continent, as I'm sure my international colleagues see letters and parcels originating from North America. Whether a postie is paid by the dollar, the euro or the pound, I'd bet we could swap places and be up to speed in no time. Currently, all eyes are on Royal Mail in the UK and Deutsche Post in Germany as these workers are in the midst of their contract negotiations. Aligned together, we will make a difference!

Globalization has tied us together, and to effectively protect our jobs and make employment gains, we must confront this reality head on. The nature of our business is international, and a successful movement by posties must also be organized with an international scope. Linking our struggles together with a clear vision and set of demands is necessary to protect our jobs against the ravages of capitalism, including rampant inflation and declining working conditions.

Working as a mail carrier for the Canada Post Corporation (CPC) is rewarding. We generally enjoy our jobs, and when the

weather is nice, it's great to be able to spend half the workday outside. The inside portion of our workday is more hit or miss. This first half is where we sort our mail, parcels and admail. Everything is then loaded into our vehicles. There is a real sense of camaraderie between workers, and we more or less look out for each other.

There is a huge seasonal variation in the workload. After a few years, one tends to get a good sense for the pace of the job. Consistent hours are not to be found at the post office. Christmas is by far the heaviest time of year in terms of both admail and parcel volumes. Tax season will see much higher volumes of mail, and once a month it's time for a big pile of bills. When schools start in the fall, admail volumes are heavier for all those "back to school" flyers.

There are two mail carrier groups at CPC: the Rural and Suburban Mail Carriers (RSMCs) and the Urban Letter Carriers (LCs). These groups are treated as distinct groups by the union and management. In contrast to the LCs, the RSMCs use their own vehicles for delivery. Gas expenditures, oil changes, brakes and tires, etc. are all the responsibility of the RSMC. When an RSMC's vehicle breaks down, it is that worker's responsibility to negotiate a tow and/or to repair their vehicle. Corporate vehicles are available to RSMCs under the rare condition that there are over 330 Rural Mail Boxes (RMBs) on the route.

RSMCs are on a fixed salary, while LCs are paid by the hour; Therefore, RSMCs are not compensated for heavier days. New hires and On-Call Relief Employees (OCREs), who juggle multiple routes throughout the workweek, work the most unpaid hours. The OCREs are paid 85 percent what a full-rate RSMC makes, regardless of how many years they have been working for CPC. Many OCREs have 5+ years seniority, and still only make the 85 percent rate. OCREs have no benefits.

Even for full-time route-holders helping out with other routes, what exactly we are paid is impossible to figure out, and only a rough dollar estimate can be established with that particular route's collateral documents, e.g., the Schedule-A. Upon review of one's pay stub, it is still impossible to know what we got paid for on any particular work activity. Our pay stubs

obfuscate important information, making it impossible to determine if our pay is correct with the stub alone. A telephone call to Human Resources can often bring clarity.

Weaponized safety practices

In late 2017, CPC started rolling out mandatory high-viz (visibility) uniforms across the country. These vests, jackets and shirts were expected to be worn when out on delivery. Goalposts on this zero-tolerance “safety” policy are constantly shifting. High-viz must now be worn at all times, even before a worker starts their day. We joke among ourselves that we go to bed in high-viz underwear, however we are actually expected to wear high-viz before we even clock in, when we exit our vehicles before our shift, potentially across the street from our workplace, where we must *pay* for parking. Again, after our shift is already over, we must don high-viz “protective equipment” (PE), until we cross the parking lot. In many cases, the parking lot is a public space, not even owned by CPC, and other pedestrians can loiter or pass through without donning any kind of PE. If I’m off the clock, how can my employer determine how I dress? I don’t want the attention that a bright yellow shirt brings. I’m just trying to get to my vehicle and drive home after a long day.

The punishment for a first-time offence is a 5-day suspension up to termination for repeat offenses. Many workers leave their uniform in the changing room lockers or at their sort-station case, but under this policy, before a worker even steps foot on corporate property or signs in, managers can issue disciplinary action. This disciplinary action is enforced seemingly at random, and is enforced most thoroughly when “higher-ups” are visiting the office. In some notable cases, the high-viz policy is enforced against targeted individuals, while other workers go unnoticed. Exceptions to this policy are not made for workers whose skin is sensitive to the high-viz polyester shirts. Especially in the hot summer months, workers are known to deal with rash outbreaks, but they are still forced to wear the offending garment under the threat of termination. Why are no high-viz cotton t-shirts made available, only stinky, unbreathable polyester?

Another issue with the high-viz policy comes down to a fundamental assault on the basic dignity of workers. Ordering uniforms is not available to all employees. New hires and some inside workers do not have access to new uniforms. These workers are expected to procure high-viz PE by rummaging through bins of discarded uniforms. As you can imagine, used uniforms are filthy and often stink. The expectation is that the employee goes home and washes their uniform before wearing it. Not only is this disgusting, but I will repeat, it is an assault on the basic dignity of Canada Post workers.

Enter the union

The Canadian Union of Postal Workers’ (CUPW) solution to any problem or potential grievance is of an extremely reactionary nature. In this gumdrops-and-bubblegum world, a grievance can trickle through the corporate/union bureaucracy. First, a contentious policy must be clarified and strengthened, to the detriment of workers. In a cruel twist of logic, all workers must be harassed equally before a government-appointed arbitrator will have the opportunity to decide on the fate of an offensive policy. What does this treacherous tactic of the union look like in practice?

Consider the high-viz PE policy. Most managers would use their discretion to only enforce the policy where it makes sense, but not on CUPW’s watch! The union forces management to call an all-hand on-deck meeting where management explains the high-viz policy to everyone. This supposedly gives the union a well-defined policy to grieve, and the effect is, instead of a few “trouble-making” employees being singled out for harassment or a few managers enforcing the rule in the parking lot, the harassment is shared equally by all employees, with brutal enforcement. Don’t even think about crossing the parking lot in the morning or evening without covering yourself in bright yellow.

This shines a light on the desperate and misguided hope that some convoluted appeal to bureaucracy will lead to positive results for the working class. The only logic the union reps are trained to understand is the logic of bureaucracy, whereas the logic of Canada Post’s upper management/ union is the logic of class war, dividing and policing the workers against each other.

The most militant-minded and progressive workers will find no refuge in the shade of CUPW. The unions are fundamentally a capitalist construct whose effect is to divert revolutionary energy away from any productive outlet, and especially away from becoming a spearhead for the broader working class. If you have gone through the official grievance process with CUPW and it was not resolved to your satisfaction, please reach out to share your story anonymously with the *World Socialist Web Site*. Join the growing international posties rank-and-file movement by filling out the form below.



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