

The yearlong UK Royal Mail dispute and the fight for rank-and-file committees

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The yearlong struggle of 115,000 post workers at Britain's Royal Mail demonstrates the determination among millions of workers all over the world to end the crippling cuts to their standard of living. It comes amid a wave of strikes in the UK and internationally. But the postal workers struggle also proves that workers cannot defend their interests while subject to the control of the bureaucratic cliques running the trade unions that police the class struggle on behalf of the corporations.

This conclusion flows inexorably from a review of the events of the past year. The struggle at Royal Mail that erupted last summer was at the centre of a strike wave by rail workers, National Health Service (NHS) workers, educators and other key workers that grew amid the biggest cost-of-living crisis in decades. Overwhelming strike mandates were delivered precisely by those sections of key workers who risked their lives during the pandemic and who were repaid with brutal attacks on their wages and conditions.

Royal Mail had made record profits of nearly £1 billion in the two years to March 2022, thanks to the Communication Workers Union (CWU)'s suppression of national strike action, citing the "interests of the nation." The company responded in 2022 by announcing tens of thousands of redundancies and a massively below inflation pay offer as part of a restructuring of the company to compete with global logistics giants such as UPS, Evri and DHL and to satisfy profit-hungry investors.

These measures have been embraced and enforced by the CWU apparatus, speaking to the broader role of the trade union bureaucracy in suppressing an explosive strike movement—a process mirrored in France, Sri Lanka, the United States and internationally.

Royal Mail workers voted to strike in July 2022 by a massive majority in two separate ballots over an imposed 2 percent pay deal and sweeping changes to terms and conditions. This coincided with strikes by over 40,000 fellow CWU members at the British Telecom company and Crown Post Offices. They mounted 18 days of action, but the CWU leadership sought throughout to come to a rotten agreement in closed door discussions with management. CWU General Secretary Dave Ward and his deputy Andy Furey appealed to "all major shareholders," pledging that the union was "up for change."

While workers went into struggle to defeat Royal Mail's

offensive, the CWU's sole concern has been to preserve its longstanding role as corporate partner. In February, after the CWU called off strike action in response to a legal challenge from Royal Mail for the second time in the dispute, hostilities between rank-and-file workers and the CWU bureaucracy were brought to a breaking point. Its refusal to organise strikes was in defiance of the overwhelming demand for renewed action registered on February 16, when the CWU was forced to hold a fresh ballot in line with the UK's anti-strike laws.

Angry postal workers responded in unprecedented numbers to the intervention made by the Socialist Equality Party. A March 14, 2023 *World Socialist Web Site* article warning of a "Sellout being prepared in closed-door talks between Royal Mail and CWU" was read over 40,000 times. An appeal for postal workers to make contact and explain their situation unleashed a flood of responses.

Over the next two months, WSWs articles on Royal Mail were read over a quarter of a million times, and many more times on social media, including articles featuring more than 340 written submissions from rank-and-file posties.

On April 2, postal workers met online to found the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee (PWRFC). A resolution was agreed upon pledging to mobilise against Royal Mail's attacks, warning that "this fight can only be waged in opposition to the Communication Workers Union leadership and apparatus, which is acting as Royal Mail's partner."

Noting that this was "the common experience of workers in all industries all over the world," the resolution declared, "Our allies are workers in France waging a heroic battle against 'President of the Rich' Emmanuel Macron, in Germany, including in the dispute at Deutsche Post, and throughout Europe and internationally." The committee therefore resolved to seek affiliation to the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

Subsequent meetings of the PWRFC have centred on opposing the CWU's attempt to ram through an agreement that includes a 10 percent pay deal over three years, changed start and finish times, regular Sunday working for new employees, and mass redundancies, providing they are "voluntary." Worst of all, 400 victimised CWU reps and members were to be left at the mercy of an "independent

review.”

With the CWU’s agreement released on April 21, Royal Mail workers came face to face with the reality that the union leaders were the chief enforcers of what the PWRFC described as the biggest attack on the working class since the 1984-85 miners strike and the union-busting of the 1986 printworkers strike at Wapping, this time enforced by the unions themselves.

Just one hour after the deal was publicised, a postal worker asked on the CWU’s Twitter account, “Is it time we started looking at alternatives?”—linking to a screenshot of an April 12 WSWS article headlined “Growing support for UK Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee.” The CWU responded by denouncing the WSWS. This attack backfired, with hundreds of comments condemning the CWU and its deal.

At a carefully stage-managed meeting in Portsmouth, Ward attacked “extreme political groups who sometimes look to infiltrate trade unions” and who have “no interest in you and the future of this company.” Acknowledging widespread opposition to the agreement, he declared, “What I don’t accept is that they should over-influence our members in this particular dispute.” This was accompanied by attacks on postal workers who criticised the deal as “keyboard warriors” and “cowards.”

The outpouring of opposition to the CWU’s sellout has forced the bureaucracy to twice pull a planned ballot because it knows it would go down in a massive defeat. It has even cancelled its annual conference. At its last meeting, the PWRFC stated that it is no longer necessary for a ballot to be held on a rotten deal that should never have been agreed to in the first place. The demand must be for strike action to resume immediately.

The committee insisted that the CWU bureaucracy is a privileged apparatus that cannot be pressured to change. It must be removed and conduct of the strike placed in the hands of the rank-and-file.

The same issue faces workers everywhere. Workers in the Royal College of Nursing, the University and College Union, primary and secondary education unions, and in the Rail, Maritime and Transport union have all prevented their leaderships from finalising deals sacrificing pay and conditions, while hundreds of thousands have been forced into accepting deals ending their struggles in betrayal.

The betrayal and transformation of the unions into pro-company entities is based on two essential factors: their acceptance of and defence of capitalism and their defence of the nation-state.

The CWU speaks of Royal Mail as a 500-year-old company founded by Henry VIII. The reality is that it is part of a massive global company, International Distribution Services, and its agenda is determined by the global struggle for market dominance. The CWU asserts a common interest between workers and employers, but Royal Mail is answerable solely to institutional shareholders and private equity investors’

demands for profits.

The trade union bureaucracy does not serve the interests of postal workers but of giant corporations such as Royal Mail that it owes its privileged existence to. And behind the corporation stands a Conservative government determined, in the cause of global competitiveness, to inflict a defeat on every struggle mounted by workers through a combination of bureaucratic betrayal and the passing of anti-democratic legislation outlawing strikes in key industries and services.

As for the Labour Party, it has for decades played a key role in working to privatize Royal Mail and systematically slash workers’ jobs and living standards. The CWU ensured the elimination of 50,000 jobs via its agreements with Labour governments between 1997 and 2010.

The struggles in the UK take place against the backdrop of a global upsurge of the class struggle all over the world, directed against the efforts by the ruling classes to slash workers’ wages, living standards and benefits to pay for the spiraling war against Russia and the massive surge of arms spending.

Last month, tens of thousands of workers in France took part in strikes against the Macron government’s attack on pensions. In the United States, workers have formed rank-and-file committees in critical sections of the rail, logistics and auto industries. A strike at automotive battery maker Clarios is winning support from autoworkers throughout the United States and around the world.

Royal Mail workers cannot limit themselves to voting down sellouts, but they must answer the fundamental question: What next? The Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee offers an answer based on the founding principle of the IWA-RFC:

For the working class to fight back, a path must be created to coordinate its struggles in different factories, industries and countries in opposition to the ruling class and the corporatist unions.

This means building new democratic organisations of class struggle in every country, industry and workplace, unifying the struggles of the working class across national divisions and unleashing the real power and potential of the working class on a world scale.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact