

Craigavon postal worker speaks about dire working conditions after CWU blocks local industrial action

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A postal worker at the Craigavon delivery office (DO) in Northern Ireland has spoken to the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) about how 130 members of the Communication Workers Union (CWU) sought to wage a fight against imposed revisions and the suspension of their two union reps back in February.

The two CWU reps were suspended after management implemented revisions by executive action. Short, unofficial walkouts lasting up to 15 minutes at the delivery office followed their being escorted from the premises two days apart.

Less than a fortnight after their suspension on February 21, a unanimous vote for local industrial action was returned by CWU members at Craigavon DO. Paperwork under Rule 13 of the CWU Rule Book was submitted by the branch to union head office but the mandate was ignored by CWU leaders Dave Ward and Andy Furey, with no reply or response to follow-up requests.

In the months since, management has imposed everything it wanted, turning the workplace into a veritable sweatshop.

Brian was suspended first and then Colin, it was around February. Everybody had had enough. We said we were worn out and we were not coming back until the two boys were re-instated. When they were contacted by phone the union said, “You are not doing it legally, you haven’t a leg to stand on. You can’t walk out.” So, he told us to go back in again.

This was all about revisions, they were all pushed through. They started adding two hours onto people. They started gradually, putting them on a couple of duties. It is impossible to complete 95 percent of them.

They have also changed the whole layout of the office. It is a disaster. We used to have drop bags, where the

packets went into, they have brought all that back. We had wee cupboards beside your frame where you could do your packets. They have taken that away. Now there is nowhere for your packets to go. We’ve got a PDA, like a big mobile phone. Everything has to be scanned and they expect us to scan all of them now.

It is packets that kill me. That is all Royal Mail are concerned about now. Packets, packets, get the packets delivered, don’t bother about the mail, but they are not coming out and saying that to the public, although they are saying it to us.

We used to have to phone if we ran out of time. Now we don’t, we just bring them back. So where is the loyalty to the customers? Then they lie about it. They will twist it, so it seems they are not leaving it, but all Royal Mail in Craigavon care about is packets, because that’s where the money is.

The place is bad for your health. It is bad for my health. I am starting to get pains, my knees, legs. The walks can be up to 30,000 steps a day [equal to 15 miles].

People now are looking to leave. I know there are five or six in the same boat, ready to go. One has gone to the council, and four weeks later he still doesn’t have his holiday pay. If Brian had been here, he would have had it the week he was leaving.

If Brian and Colin came back into that office now, they would find it unrecognisable. We used to just sign in and sign out, now we have to scan, they said that wouldn’t be happening. They said Sunday working wouldn’t be happening but there are people doing it at the minute, mostly just for packets. No double time. Why would you ruin your Sunday?

Colin was on the Lurgan side and Brian was my rep. Brian was a union man before he started here. He was a union man in a carpet factory in town. And then he took

the nightshift on at Christmas and then he got a full-time job. He was just an ordinary worker. He was watching the bullying going on and he couldn't take any more and that's how he took the rep position. We didn't have any rep before. He was very good at his job, and they didn't like that, someone who stood up to them. If the CWU were half as brave as him, we wouldn't be in the mess we are in now.

It's a disgrace. Whatever we pay a week, £3 or £4 a week, near £200 a year: what is the point in being in the union if Royal Mail can just do whatever they want? And the CWU are just standing by and letting them do it. They [the reps] should all be re-instated. The CWU should be saying we are not doing anything until all the reps are put back.

What postal workers understand as a basic principle to be fought for by collective action is ruled out and suppressed by the CWU bureaucracy, consistent with the surrender terms it has offered Royal Mail to end the national dispute.

Around 400 CWU reps and members are reported to have been suspended or sacked over the course of the year-long struggle. The Business Recovery, Transformation and Growth Agreement, or “national agreement”, has left the fate of victimised workers at the mercy of a review headed up by Lord Falconer. The real nature of the “Independent Review of Conduct Cases” is exposed by the fact that the former Blairite minister also acted as an advisor to the National Coal Board during the 1984-5 miners' strike. To date, the CWU has reported only 200 consent forms have been submitted for review.

This kangaroo court was never agreed to by the membership. It was the product of closed-door talks organised through the arbitration service ACAS with Ward, Furey and Royal Mail from February. This was the corporatist framework used to veto the 96 percent mandate for renewed national strike action and to hash out the full terms of the sellout agreement.

The CWU has started the process of the review without a single vote cast by its 115,000 members on the national agreement. Its postal executive has already postponed the ballot twice to prevent a No vote, with postal workers up in arms over the total surrender—including a major real terms pay cut, flexibility of start and finish times, reduction in sick pay and a two-tier workforce.

Whether it is a mandate for industrial action, to hold a strike or the right to vote down a rotten deal, postal workers are consistently withheld their rights through the

official channels by a bureaucratic apparatus not accountable to them but to the executives and shareholders of Royal Mail.

Ward and Furey reinstated the ballot on the agreement citing a June 16 joint statement with Royal Mail touting “progress”, including over revisions. The last time the CWU made such a boast based on a joint statement over revisions with Royal Mail was on March 2. This opened the floodgates to the wave of attacks which have not let up since. In the recent words of Royal Mail Chief Operating Officer, Grant McPherson, this enabled the completion of “the biggest revision in the history of the business”. It has left in its wake the destruction of 10,000 jobs, punishing workloads and the gutting of the universal service obligation.

The joint statement guarantees the position of the union bureaucracy through the reinstatement of the Industrial Relation Framework in “future revision activity”. This is in return for services already rendered. It is in line with the blueprint for even more brutal restructuring signed up to by the CWU leadership which wants to take its seat in the Joint Working Group and Transformation Boards.

The collective opposition and power of postal workers must be asserted against the union apparatus with the rejection of the sellout agreement and removal of Ward and Furey. Decision making must be transferred to the rank and file so that workers can democratically decide a strategy to fightback. We encourage postal workers to join the next online Zoom meeting of the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee, on Sunday June 25 at 7pm, to discuss this perspective.



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