CWU betrayal at Royal Mail: Draw the lessons and organise the fightback

Statement by the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee (UK)
14 July 2023

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Dear brothers and sisters,

Dave Ward, Andy Furey and the postal executive of the Communication Workers Union (CWU) have inflicted a historic betrayal of postal workers' year-long battle against Royal Mail.

All postal workers will pay a bitter price for the imposition of the CWU's pro-company agreement through further massive revisions, longer hours, the tearing up of basic entitlements, punitive attendance policies and a two-tier workforce.

Everything Royal Mail ever wanted has been delivered by Ward, Furey and the postal executive. Reductions to indoor work will be rolled out nationally from August, with "indoor method change" trials underway, announced jointly by the company and CWU this week.

Thousands of jobs are under immediate threat, on top of the 10,000 destroyed through colleagues being driven out. The job will become a living hell.

Hundreds if not thousands have already left the CWU in disgust. Local workplaces have passed resolutions calling for a mass resignation over the CWU's rotten sellout that overturns conditions won in generations of struggle.

In response, Ward and Furey have cynically appealed for "unity", insisting the Yes vote must be accepted as the "democratic will of the majority". The CWU's unaccountable clique has suppressed far larger democratic mandates for industrial action, month after month, while they conspired with Royal Mail against us.

The only ballot they demand be honoured is the one that finally went their way. That's "democracy" according to Ward, Furey and their unelected Head of Communications Chris Webb.

Those tens of thousands of postal workers disgusted and angered by the betrayal of our struggle must reject any attempt to blame those who voted for the agreement. The truth is that both groups of postal workers are united in their view that the CWU was determined to impose its surrender document no matter what. The Yes vote was a vote of no confidence in the CWU bureaucracy's intent to wage any kind of fight against the company.

Voting Yes was wrong, and many who did so already regret it. But the enemy of all CWU members is the national leadership and their flunkeys and political defenders.

The *real* issue is posed: how before do we such a grotesque act of sabotage by the CWU?

Everything depends on postal workers starting to organise independently and in direct opposition to the pro-company bureaucracy.

To those who have left the CWU and to those who have chosen to remain, we say: join the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee (PWRFC), the only organisation that warned against the CWU leadership's conspiracy with Royal Mail and which sought to mobilise workers in a collective fight against it.

Workers should organise meetings now at their delivery offices and mail centres to establish rank-and-file committees and prepare the fight against the agreement's implementation.

At the start of our dispute the *World Socialist Web Site* warned, "Royal Mail's renewed offensive has been made possible by the CWU's deepening collusion with the company during the pandemic." In July 2022, WSWS acknowledged our determination to defeat Royal Mail's attacks on pay and conditions while warning, "The allegiance of the CWU, however, is not to its membership but the company".

The PWRFC was established on April 2 by a group of postal workers from delivery, mail centres and Parcelforce who agreed with the need for a collective struggle by the rank-and-file against the CWU bureaucracy. This must now be expanded and transformed into a mass rank-and-file movement for change.

Meetings must be organised to discuss what needs to be done. There will be those who say stay in the CWU and fight. Others are calling for the formation of a new union. All these options can be discussed, and a democratic decision made. But rank-and-file committees are the only body which can unify *all* those workers who want to fight back. The worst thing that can happen is allowing the massive groundswell of opposition to be dissipated into limited forms of individual protest.

The way forward

Any discussion of the way forward must involve a review of the essential lessons of the year-long dispute.

One year ago, Royal Mail workers stood at the head of a broader strike wave embracing 2 million workers across the railways,

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London Underground, BT, oil refineries, lorry drivers, university and college lecturers, NHS workers, bus drivers and many more. In France, workers launched the biggest strikes and protests since 1968, while mass strikes erupted in Greece, Belgium, and other countries.

The working class had the power to bring down the Conservative government, defeat its anti-strike laws and push back the corporate and state onslaught. But the Labour and trade union bureaucracy stifled and suppressed this movement.

Ward, Mick Lynch and other supposedly "left" trade union officials promoted campaign group Enough is Enough, to block the movement for a general strike and channel workers behind the re-election of a right-wing Labour government. At mass rallies Lynch ludicrously appealed to Sir Keir Starmer to "decide which side you are on", while Ward demanded, "Never forget there's some great Labour politicians. They deserve our support because they are with us."

Ward and Lynch divided workers sector by sector, limiting strikes to ineffective one-day (occasionally two-day) action to wear down resistance while Ward entered closed-door talks aimed at preserving the bureaucracy's partnership with Royal Mail.

The outcome was the Business Recovery, Transformation and Growth Agreement, the biggest attack on postal workers in history and the basis of the sell-out.

The betrayal organised by the CWU is not the result of a few bad leaders. The entire apparatus of the CWU, from head office down to local branches, confronts the membership as a hostile force enforcing the union-company line.

The victimisation, suspension and sacking of 400 CWU reps and members was central to the aims of the company *and* the union. They have been abandoned by Ward and Furey because their agreement meant getting rid of anyone who would stand up to Royal Mail.

There is nothing unique about the CWU bureaucracy's role. The privileged apparatus at the head of every trade union in the UK and around the world knows their six-figure salaries depend on their role as partners with management, imposing the dictates of the corporations and the government on workers. The result has been the defeat of every single struggle that has erupted over the past year and the imposition of below inflation pay awards, speed-ups, job losses and the continued destruction of the NHS, education and other vital services.

Ward's talk of "mutual interest solutions" and insistence that any fight against the demands of Royal Mail shareholders would result in "mutual self-destruction" is part of this.

The PWRFC rejected Ward's demands that postal workers must pay for the financial debacle caused by Royal Mail's rampant profiteering and squandering of resources. We proposed the following red lines in the fight against Royal Mail's dictates:

- No pay cuts! For an inflation-busting pay-rise funded by major shareholders!
- No surrender of terms and conditions! Hands off sick pay, hours and entitlements!
- No inferior conditions for new entrants! Reject a two-tier workforce!
- No agreement with Royal Mail unless all victimised workers and reps are unconditionally reinstated!

Our statements and articles were read hundreds of thousands of times, while hundreds of postal workers wrote to WSWS, working with the committee to expose the CWU's role in blocking local strike votes in defence of sacked reps and to defeat hated revisions. The CWU's attacks on us reflected their fear of an organised insurgency breaking their grip over the dispute and opening the floodgates to a mass intervention by postal workers.

As an affiliate of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), the PWRFC has forged links during the dispute with postal workers in Belgium, Germany, Australia and the United States. As the mission statement of the IWA-RFC declared:

> 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…The IWA-RFC will work to develop the framework for new forms of independent, democratic and militant rank-and-file organizations of workers in factories, schools and workplaces on an international scale. The working class is ready to fight. But it is shackled by reactionary bureaucratic organizations that suppress every expression of resistance… New pathways for mass struggle must be created.

Our year-long struggle was betrayed, but the need for an organised insurgency against the CWU-Royal Mail conspiracy could not be clearer.

We appeal to all those opposed to the CWU's act of sabotage to register and attend the online Zoom meeting called by the PWRFC on Sunday July 23, 7pm. Circulate this statement and get in touch to begin the fight for a rank-and-file alternative.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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