

Dave Ward and Mick Lynch: Birds of a feather

Laura Tiernan
20 July 2023

Dave Ward, General Secretary of the Communication Workers Union (CWU), and Mick Lynch, General Secretary of the Rail Maritime and Transport union (RMT), co-authored an article in the *Daily Mirror* on July 7, opposing the mass closure of railway ticket offices and linking this to Royal Mail's reduction in opening hours at customer parcel collection offices.

The pair, catapulted to national prominence at the start of last year's UK strike wave, described the market-driven assault on the railways and postal service as "a direct attack on the fibres that bind our society together including the values of democracy, equality and looking after every person."

They continued, "We write jointly, as two trade union leaders to let you know these attacks are coordinated."

Among postal workers who fought a bitter year-long dispute at Royal Mail, Ward's joint statement provoked anger and derision. He is a hate figure among Royal Mail workers for negotiating an agreement with company executives—dubbed the surrender document—which delivers the deepest attack on postal workers' terms and conditions in history.

Just days after Ward's *Mirror* commentary, the Royal Mail dispute was ended by the CWU pushing through acceptance of its Business Recovery, Growth and Transformation Agreement endorsed by the CWU's postal executive in April. The union-company agreement rewrites employment contracts, introduces later finish times and shift "flexibility", guts sick pay and redundancy entitlements, imposes a brutal new attendance and performance regime, ushers in pay-per-parcel and a two-tier workforce with new entrants on inferior pay and conditions.

Ward's *Mirror* article with Lynch drew hundreds of comments on the CWU's Facebook page. "Only thing that charlatan Ward should be writing is his resignation letter. Hang your head in shame. Embarrassing," wrote one postal worker.

But while postal workers condemned Ward for imposing the company's assault, many expressed illusions in Lynch. "You wouldn't see Mick Lynch selling his people out for a poxy 10% over 3 years along with a savage hack on their T's & C's. The CWU are a disgrace", said one. "I wish Mick was our leader" and "Mr Lynch is fighting for his members, CWU has bottled it and sold theirs out," wrote others.

In fact, Lynch and the RMT's National Executive Committee (NEC) have pursued an identical strategy to that of Ward and the CWU during the 18-month rail dispute. They are responsible for a betrayal of rail workers no less devastating than that confronting Royal Mail workers.

Lynch's record of betrayal

Lynch and Ward decry a "failed Thatcherite ideology", denouncing corporate executives whose bonuses "come off the backs of destroying

once great companies, stripping them out and putting shareholder pay-outs ahead of anything else." But they have enabled this process, working in partnership with Royal Mail, the train operating companies and the Sunak government.

In January 2021, the RMT joined the Rail Industry Recovery Group (RIRG), a body tasked "post-pandemic" with the introduction of sweeping pro-market reforms as part of the Conservative government's Great British Railways project. The RMT joined rail unions ASLEF, TSSA and Unite in signing its Enabling Framework Agreement (EFA) in June 2021 "to specifically address the workforce reforms and staff cost challenges the rail industry is facing".

Section 4 of the EFA document signed by Lynch, "Revising Working Arrangements and Practices", outlined plans for an overhaul of employment terms and conditions, including "robust working arrangements for Sundays" and "agile working practices" across all grades.

After the *World Socialist Web Site* exposed the RMT as a signatory to the EFA, Lynch issued a press release claiming the union had only joined the RIRG to shape its outcome. From the standpoint of the working class, the only legitimate response to the RIRG was to boycott it, demanding the complete withdrawal of its scorched earth agenda. Instead, the RMT signed up to proposals to slash £2 billion from the railways via the tearing up of conditions and "voluntary" mass redundancies.

In January this year, the RMT went further still, signing a "Dispute Resolution Agreement" with all 14 train operating companies (TOCs) setting out "National Principles" for "Workforce Changes". In scope and impact, it is no different from the "surrender document" negotiated by Ward and the CWU postal executive with Royal Mail.

The RMT's 16-page agreement—negotiated behind its members' backs—endorsed workplace reforms demanded by the TOCs aimed at delivering maximum profit to shareholders. It included replacing all station-based roles with a "multi-skilled station grade", a new inferior salary structure for all new entrants to on-board crew roles (conductors, guards and on-board supervisors/managers) and a new "Approved Codes of Practice" to deliver on-board "efficiency improvements".

Compulsory Sunday working was agreed, and the RMT accepted that "Bank and Public Holidays will be a normal working day". All station grade roles would be moved into "station groups", forcing staff to travel wherever they are directed within the group. A new "attendance management policy" proposed a 4-stage process whereby staff will be harassed for taking sick leave.

Crucially, while Lynch now publicly opposes the mass closure of ticket offices, the RMT agreed that station "modernisation" would "incorporate the closure and re-purposing of the traditional ticket office facilities". Page four of the agreement stated, "Whilst the RMT does not support TOCs proposals to conduct statutory public consultation on the closure or re-purposing of ticket offices the RMT acknowledges that the TOCs have the authority to implement such changes to ticket office provision that

may arise from that process.”

All staff who “reasonably” refused redeployment to new roles or locations would be designated “Displaced” and “Used to Best Advantage (UBA)”. If they “unreasonably” refused, “their employment could be terminated”. The pay component of the agreement was a below-inflation 5 percent for 2022 and 4 percent for 2023—less than half the rate of inflation.

In April, after the Rail Delivery Group (representing TOCs) demanded the RMT end the dispute and terminate any further strike ballots as a precondition for passing on a two-stage (below-inflation) pay rise, the RMT announced they were withdrawing support for the Dispute Resolution Process. On May 4, RMT members across 14 TOCs delivered an overwhelming vote for strike action. But the RDG, backed by the government, has been emboldened by the RMT’s collusion. Railway workers are striking this week, but they are fighting attacks on their pay, terms and conditions that have already been agreed in-principle by the RMT’s NEC.

Enough is Enough

The last time Ward and Lynch stood publicly side-by-side was at the head of campaign group Enough is Enough, launched last August by sections of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy. Its purpose was to block the movement for a general strike and to channel workers behind the re-election of a right-wing Labour government.

Lynch and Ward used their credentials as “left” trade union leaders to head off militant demands by striking workers for coordinated action to bring down the Tories. At mass rallies, Lynch appealed to Sir Keir Starmer—busy threatening to expel MPs for visiting pickets—to “decide which side you are on,” while stressing his support for a Starmer-led Labour government. Ward reinforced this message, insisting, “There’s some great Labour politicians. They deserve our support because they are with us.”

The few remaining Corbynite MPs from Labour’s rump Socialist Campaign Group, including Zarah Sultana and Ian Byrne, were featured speakers at Enough is Enough rallies, promoting the illusion that a future Labour government would listen to workers’ demands. But the actions of Jeremy Corbyn, cowering before Starmer and refusing any struggle against the right-wing, was the real measure of these forces.

Meanwhile, the RMT, CWU and other unions deliberately wore down workers’ resistance, dividing strikes by sector, work grade and region, and limiting action to ineffective one-day (occasionally two-day) strikes aimed at forcing the employers and government to the negotiating table. Ward and Lynch’s insistence that change and modernisation had to be “agreed not imposed” pointed to their real objectives. By the end of the year, the pair were deep in talks with the employers seeking to preserve their partnerships with Royal Mail, the train operating companies and the government.

The RMT’s dispute resolution agreement in January included a no-strike pledge, committing that it would not take “planned or future industrial action in connection with any of the Workforce Change proposals in this Agreement”. A similar process took place at Royal Mail, with the CWU executive shelving a renewed strike mandate of 96 percent by members in February. Strikes held on Christmas Eve 2022 were the last held in the dispute as Ward began negotiations that ultimately produced the biggest attack on postal workers in history.

A “common sense” trade union leader

Ward and Lynch’s appeal in the *Mirror* is part of efforts to trail a possible merger between the two unions. This has been discussed at meetings of reps, although no official announcement has been made by either the CWU or RMT.

Both unions are passing through a major crisis. The CWU has lost almost 10,000 postal members due to workers leaving the industry or quitting in disgust. Tens of thousands of job cuts announced at BT, following the betrayal of last year’s strike by the CWU, will leave the union a shell. The RMT, which reports 83,000 members across the transport and maritime sectors, will see a significant drop in union subs as mass redundancies proceed across the TOCs and Network Rail.

Promoted as “left” unions, workers are experiencing firsthand that the RMT and CWU are no different from any other union in their collusion with the employers and their sabotage of any effective fightback against the corporate-government assault. Rank-and-file members confront “corporatism”, the integration of the trade unions with company boardrooms and the state, a process accelerated over the past three decades by globalisation. Led by salaried officials whose pay packets place them in the top ten percent of income earners, the unions have haemorrhaged members. Just 23.1 percent of Britain’s workforce now belongs to a union, just 12.8 percent in the private sector, 11.6 percent among those aged 20-24 and only 2.4 percent of 16–19-year-olds.

Amid a historic crisis of bourgeois rule—encompassing a mass upsurge of the international class struggle, a Conservative government in meltdown, the largest mass strikes and protests in France since May-June 1968 and an escalating war by NATO against Russia in Ukraine—Lynch played a critical role for the ruling class. Using his decades of experience in the labour and trade union bureaucracy and exploiting the fake “socialist” credentials bestowed on him by the parties and publications of the affluent pseudo-left (Socialist Party, Socialist Workers Party, Socialist Appeal, *Morning Star*, *Canary* etc), he has effectively policed and suppressed the class struggle.

But Lynch’s essential function has been to block the development of a genuine socialist perspective and leadership in the working class.

Among fawning commentators in the *Guardian* and the *Financial Times*, he is described approvingly as a “common sense”, “pragmatic” and “reasonable” leader. They recognise that he accepts and upholds the existing political and economic order.

Last summer, Lynch spoke with LBC radio’s James O’Brien about his political beliefs. “People get very frightened by this term ‘class’. But there’s a ruling class and there’s a working class,” he said. Pointing to the vast wealth hoarded by Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk, Lynch stated, “We don’t own the means of production, we serve it. We get a wage or an income from it. But they own it and control it and can deploy it any which way they want.”

He then asked rhetorically, “What do you do about that? Do you go around setting fire to people’s houses? I’m not one of those people. I’m not a Leninist or a Trotskyist or Stalinist or whatever. I’m not an anarchist. I’m a reformist. I don’t particularly want a revolution... I believe we need a police force. We need to defend the country from aggression. I believe we do need the state. I don’t want to tear it down I want to change it”.

Having acknowledged the class struggle, Lynch proposes that the ruling class, including 2,640 billionaires globally who have increased their wealth by \$852 billion in the first half of 2023, must simply “give up the idea that they can control everything”! This miracle, he argues, can be achieved “gradually” through “progressive regulation” and “progressive taxation”.

Lynch’s remarks give full expression to the prejudices of Britain’s labour and trade union bureaucracy, steeped in deference to the capitalist system. He is of course fully aware of the gulf separating Trotskyism from Stalinism. His NEC is packed with Stalinists such as Alex Gordon and

Eddie Dempsey who have worked throughout the dispute as his loyal lieutenants. His puerile equation of revolutionary Marxism with anarchistic “house burning” and his overall tone of ridicule toward the history of the international socialist movement is aimed at blocking the many workers and young people who are turning to the left in response to the economic crisis of capitalism.

The rubbishing of revolutionary socialism is accompanied by constant efforts to downplay the implications of the class struggle. When *Sky* news journalist Kay Burley interviewed Lynch about the rail strikes last summer, baiting him on whether pickets would block scabs as the miners did in the 1980s, Lynch turned to face the handful of picketers behind him asking, “Does this look like the miners’ strike?”

Lynch’s effective disavowal of the miners’ strike, and his ridiculing of any comparison with the rail strikes, served to conceal the gravity of the situation facing the working class. Just weeks earlier, his members on the London underground had faced a state witch-hunt for shutting down rail services at the start of NATO’s military mobilisation against Russia in Ukraine. The *Telegraph* branded strikers as “Putin’s stooges” and the “enemy underground”, invoking Thatcher’s depiction of striking coal miners in 1984-85 as “the enemy within” to justify mass arrests, jailings and state violence.

On picket lines last year, many workers referenced the miners’ strike, explaining that a defeat on the railways would be a defeat for the entire working class. Class tensions are far greater than they were four decades ago, a product of unprecedented social inequality. The battery of new laws overturning the right to protest, cracking down on journalistic freedom and eviscerating the right to strike reflect a ruling class that fears a social explosion of revolutionary dimensions.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)