

Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee meeting draws lessons of CWU Royal Mail betrayal and discusses fightback strategy

Our reporter
25 July 2023

The Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee (PWRFC) met Sunday to discuss the lessons of the year-long dispute at Royal Mail. It was the first Zoom meeting held since the Communication Workers Union (CWU) pushed through its pro-company agreement in a ballot ending on July 11.

A report was given on the looming contract fight by 340,000 UPS workers in the United States by a speaker from the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

Tony Robson, a writer for the World Socialist Web Site (WSWS), opened by drawing attention to the committee's recent statement, "CWU betrayal at Royal Mail: Draw the lessons to organise a fightback."

"It has taken a year for Royal Mail to enforce its agenda and overcome the combative resistance of more than 100,000 postal workers who stood in the vanguard of a strike wave from last Summer," he said. "The responsibility for this lies squarely with the CWU bureaucracy under Dave Ward and Andy Furey."

The committee's statement had rejected the CWU's bogus narrative that a 75 percent "yes" vote reflected "overwhelming endorsement" of their pro-company agreement. A third of the membership didn't vote and it was passed by barely 50 percent of eligible members.

For months, the CWU berated those advocating a "no" vote and violated the democratic rights of members. "This included their executive veto of a 96 percent vote in February to renew strikes. They twice suspended balloting to forestall a 'no' vote and worked with the company to enforce key aspects of the surrender document before a single vote was counted."

Postal workers were confronting "the full integration of the CWU bureaucracy into management" from head office down to local reps. The agreement "cements the role of the CWU as corporate partners in the drive for increased productivity and competitiveness, overseen through Joint Working Groups."

The dispute's outcome has exposed the lie peddled by union "activist" groups, such as Postal Workers Say Vote No, who claimed that Ward and Furey could be pressured to reverse their agreement with the company. Andy Young, a union rep

and member of Workers Power, had attacked the establishment of the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee as "premature". This was bound up with efforts to conceal the CWU's transformation into an arm of the company.

While workers were denouncing the CWU's agreement as a "surrender document", a model resolution drawn up by Young claimed the agreement had "pushed back" the company in some areas, later describing the 35-page Thatcherite recipe book as "sadly not good enough".

After the vote, Young tried to legitimise the sham ballot process, claiming a healthy "debate" had taken place and that the result should be respected—echoing Ward and Furey's insistence that the members had spoken.

The Committee's record

Robson explained, "The Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee has established a marker for the struggle ahead. We have brought together workers from delivery, mail centres and Parcelforce. We exposed how hated revisions were being implemented with the CWU's help through the IR framework agreed with Royal Mail. Where rule 13 local industrial action was voted for by members to defend victimised reps, we exposed how these were quashed by CWU HQ."

"Our statements and articles published on the *World Socialist Web Site* have been read in their tens of thousands. We were only established in April and do not command the resources of the CWU bureaucracy, but Ward and his henchman Chris Webb [Head of Communications] were forced to publicly attack us for 'over influencing' workers during the dispute."

"This is because we offered an alternative to the CWU's betrayal and its insistence that postal workers must sacrifice to pay for the rampant profiteering by company executives and billionaire shareholders, outlining non-negotiable demands based on the interests of postal workers and the entire working class."

A postal worker from Glasgow told the meeting, “We don’t trust Royal Mail or the CWU, but where do we turn?” Another ridiculed the CWU’s call for unity, saying their role as company enforcers would never be forgiven.

Some called for the formation of a new union. Robson said the proposal raised fundamental issues. He explained that the CWU’s betrayal was not simply the product of a few rotten leaders and nor was it confined to the CWU. Based on their defence of capitalism and the nation-state system, trade unions all over the world had become integrated with corporate boardrooms and the state.

Report from America

Tom Hall, a writer for the WSWS, brought greetings from the newly formed UPS Rank-and-File Committee, which is also affiliated to the IWA-RFC.

Hall explained that the IWA-RFC’s expansion “is part of the process by which the international working class is beginning to elaborate a single international perspective against the outmoded and reactionary profit system the world over.”

In the United States, the largest strike movement in generations was underway, with combined action by screen actors and writers and opposition snowballing among industrial workers, including an impending battle by 150,000 workers in the car industry, on top of strike ballots at UPS, Yellow and in other sectors.

Workers fighting on the pressing day-to-day issues of pay, working hours and conditions were confronted directly with the role of the state clamping down on their rights, and a nationalist trade union bureaucracy defending a capitalist system based on ever deepening exploitation of the working class.

“In nine days, the current 5-year contract expires for 340,000 UPS workers across the country. It was imposed upon them in 2018 by the bureaucracy of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters despite a majority voting against it. It contained massive concessions, including the creation of a second-tier of delivery drivers, known as ‘hybrid’ drivers or ‘22.4s’

“The Teamsters have been working with UPS management for decades to impose concessions, especially since the introduction of part-time work in the company’s warehouses in the 1970s. As a result, two-thirds of the workforce today are part-time. They are overwhelmingly young and live from hand to mouth, making as little as \$15.50 an hour – about £12 – and working between 3 and 4 hours a day.

“The UPS interviews published over the weekend in the WSWS give some sense of the situation. One part-timer said he had not eaten in two days. In the United States, which, we are told, is the wealthiest country in the world, the conditions of the working class have been thrown back by a century.”

The committee was fighting for the unity of UPS workers with postal and logistics workers across the US and globally. US Postal Services workers are confronting a brutal assault with thousands of post offices marked for closure, 50,000 jobs facing the axe and more than 60 percent of rural letter carriers having their wages slashed by as much as \$10,000 to \$20,000 based on a new compensation formula.

The UPS rank-and-file committee was holding an online meeting later that night to launch a fightback in defence of 20,000 freight trucking workers at Yellow, a company on the verge of bankruptcy through debts to Wall Street investors and the US government.

Around 300 UPS and Yellow workers had registered to attend, the largest turnout since meetings of the Railroad Workers Rank-and-File Committee (RWRFC) during last year’s dispute which brought 120,000 rail workers into direct conflict with the Biden administration. As a result of the RWRFC’s intervention, the union bureaucracy had struggled to retain control, forcing the Biden administration to intervene to impose the rail contract and outlaw strike action.

Biden’s repression of the rail strikes (backed by leading Democrats such as Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez) had exposed his promotion as “the most pro-union president ever”. Hall emphasised that rather than being seen simply as an end of the dispute it was a turning point which had underscored the necessity for a worked-out strategy of organised rebellion against the union apparatus.

Workers engaged in the developing struggles including at UPS are aware that the same danger confronts them and have been forearmed, adding to the impetus to develop the IWA-RFC. That same evening the Teamsters Union announced that it had reached a deal with Yellow to avert a strike.

Hall urged Royal Mail workers to make the lessons of their dispute the common property of workers in the UK and internationally. This was welcomed by postal workers in attendance. One said, “Thanks Tom for your report and we’ll be watching with interest... I’ll be on a mission to recruit,” while another added, “We may be few, but it only takes one person to strike a match and show the light. As long as we carry the torch many will follow.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact