

How the “friends” of Royal Mail workers helped the CWU inflict defeat - Part 1

Laura Tiernan
11 August 2023

The following article is the first of a two-part series. Part two was posted on August 13, 2023.

One month has passed since the Communication Workers Union (CWU) led by Dave Ward and Andy Furey succeeded in pushing through their pro-company “Business Recovery, Growth and Transformation Agreement” in a ballot whose results were announced July 11.

The impact of the CWU’s agreement is already being felt by tens of thousands of Royal Mail workers: punitive new attendance procedures and reduced sick pay; the shuttering of parcel collection offices; cuts to indoor sorting time forcing delivery workers to pound the streets for longer with impossible workloads; unknown numbers earmarked for redeployment and redundancy as automated super hubs come into operation.

Ward and Furey are despised figures among militant postal workers. Thousands have resigned from the union, while discussions are underway at delivery offices and mail centres on the lessons of the year-long dispute.

The struggle at Royal Mail has exposed the unbridgeable gulf between the privileged bureaucracy serving as an arm of corporate management, and the membership.

Rank-and-file opposition erupted —just four months into the dispute—after the CWU’s cancellation of strikes following legal threats from the company. Workers began denouncing Ward and Furey, demanding action to defeat the company’s aggressive “revisions” to terms and conditions. But the CWU stared this down, entering talks at conciliation service ACAS and allowing the company to impose its workplace agenda through bullying and coercion.

From October through March, the *World Socialist Web Site*’s coverage of the dispute won a growing audience among Royal Mail workers. Its exposure of the CWU’s pro-company agenda chimed with the sentiments of thousands of workers who were determined to fight.

This led to the formation of the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee (PWRFC) on April 2, 2023. The committee advocated a path of independent struggle against the CWU bureaucracy. Affiliated to the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), it forged links with postal workers in Belgium, Germany, Australia and the United States. The committee’s statements circulated widely at Royal Mail, especially after the CWU’s pro-company agreement was published in April.

Between April and June, the CWU bureaucracy was plunged into crisis, terrified that workers’ anger would coalesce into organised mass resistance, breaking its stranglehold over the dispute.

The rank-and-file committee won a sympathetic hearing among postal workers, but Ward and Furey maintained control and were able to ram through the company’s attacks. Their ability to do so was made possible by Britain’s pseudo-left organisations. Groups such as the Socialist Workers Party, Socialist Party and Workers Power intervened throughout the dispute to promote illusions that the CWU bureaucracy could be pressured to fight for workers’ interests, concealing its fundamental role as an arm of corporate management and the state.

These groups, representing sections of the upper middle class including those with lucrative positions in the apparatus of the trade unions, formed the “left” flank of efforts by the Stalinist *Morning Star*, the pro-Corbyn *Canary* and newly formed campaign group Enough is Enough to protect the labour and trade union bureaucracy from a rank-and-file insurgency, block the fight for socialism and channel workers behind a future Labour government.

Dave Ward’s political backers

In April, Ward addressed an online meeting of CWU reps, attacking “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 CWU’s pro-company agreement, he declared, “What I don’t accept is that they [political groups] should over-influence our members in this particular dispute.”

Ward’s attack was a pathetic attempt to whip-up prejudices against socialism and Marxism while he and the CWU sought to “over-influence” workers on behalf of Royal Mail shareholders. In his 1998 essay, “Why are trade unions hostile to socialism?”, David North reviewed the historical development of trade unions from the mid-19th century, showing their universal tendency to suppress the class struggle, which finds its most conscious expression in the union bureaucracy’s hostility to socialism: “Standing on the basis of capitalist production relations, the trade unions are, by their very nature, compelled to adopt a hostile

attitude toward the class struggle. Directing their efforts toward securing agreements with employers that fix the price of labor-power and determine the general conditions in which surplus-value will be pumped out of the workers, the trade unions are obligated to guarantee that their members supply their labor-power in accordance with the terms of the negotiated contracts. As Gramsci noted, ‘The union represents legality, and must aim to make its members respect that legality.’ The defense of legality means the suppression of the class struggle.”

While Ward and the bureaucracy repeatedly attacked the WSWS, they promoted the Labour Party and its right-wing politics. Labour MP Darren Jones was invited by the CWU to its national briefing of reps on April 21, presented as the saviour of postal workers and given a standing ovation. Jones publicly supported the CWU’s surrender document.

Royal Mail workers confronted a political struggle from the start against a Tory government rushing through essential services legislation to break the strike and a Labour opposition whose leader Sir Keir Starmer threatened to sack any shadow cabinet MP who visited a picket line. Their vicious response to the strike was part of efforts to suppress a growing strike wave they feared could bring down the government, jeopardising NATO’s proxy-war in Ukraine against Russia. In October, with Truss’s premiership in meltdown, Defence Secretary Ben Wallace was summoned to the White House for urgent discussions that were later described as “beyond belief”.

If thousands of Royal Mail workers were blindsided by Ward’s betrayal of the strike, this was above all the responsibility of the Socialist Party, SWP and similar petty-bourgeois groups which built him up for years as a “left”. After Ward became general secretary in 2015, defeating incumbent Billy Hayes, the SP urged delegates to the CWU’s conference to “let Ward know they expect him to deliver on the more assertive stance that his election campaign indicated.” Despite Ward having worked with Hayes to ensure smooth passage of Royal Mail’s privatisation in 2013, the SP wrote, “Socialists in the union should demand that Dave Ward campaigns on the union’s progressive policies and gives members and reps the confidence to stand up to management.”

The backing of Ward by Britain’s pseudo-left was consolidated through their joint support for Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, who spent his five years in power suppressing the class struggle and capitulating to the Blairites on every front.

In 2016, SWP National Secretary Charlie Kimber interviewed Ward in *Socialist Worker* under the headline, “CWU leader Dave Ward says, ‘We need a strategy to beat the Tories’”. Kimber gushed, “Like us, you’ve been enthusiastic about Jeremy Corbyn’s election”. Ward responded by saying Labour had to be “prepared to say it will shift wealth to workers.” But he cautioned, “we have to be patient. If Corbyn is elected saying he will renationalise three industries and he manages one, that’s still an improvement, still a success.” Kimber then politely alluded to “the difficulties Corbyn is facing over an issue like Trident,” i.e., the Parliamentary Labour Party’s insistence that Trident nuclear weapons would remain Labour policy. Ward replied, “I think saying we’re all against nuclear weapons is the wrong starting point.” Ward’s de facto endorsement of nuclear weapons passed

without comment by the SWP. Corbyn retained support for Trident—alongside NATO—in Labour’s election manifesto.

Socialist Party

Aside from the *Morning Star*, published by the Stalinist Communist Party of Britain, the most naked defender of Ward and Furey during the dispute was the Socialist Party. With thousands of postal workers denouncing the CWU’s surrender document, the SP was plunged into crisis. It was a full five days before the SP could bring itself to comment on one of the most savage betrayals by the union bureaucracy in recent history.

On April 26, a statement by “Socialist Party members in the CWU” appeared in *The Socialist*. It claimed the negotiators’ agreement had “forced Royal Mail back on a number of issues”, before noting regretfully that this was “not enough” and calling for a “no” vote by members. The SP claimed the agreement was the outcome of “anti-trade union management, hell-bent on smashing our union”. This was a political cover for the CWU national executive, which co-authored the agreement with Royal Mail’s board. The SP portrayed the bureaucracy’s actions as a “mistake” which could be rectified through friendly advice: “The CWU leadership was unprepared for the type of battle this has turned into... The union’s leadership should have prepared, through discussion at all levels of the union, for escalating action.”

While the CWU executive was being denounced by workers as company stooges, the SP was calling on the executive to fight for Royal Mail’s renationalisation, “particularly when CEO Simon Thompson and co threatened administration.” But it was Ward and Furey threatening financial “Armageddon” against CWU members if they failed to endorse the union-company agreement. The SP’s absurd appeals served definite political ends, subordinating the working class to the Labour Party and to the Sunak government. It even suggested that both Starmer and the Tories could be pressured to oppose Royal Mail’s attacks: “The CWU leadership should have demanded that Keir Starmer publicly commit to the policy passed at last autumn’s Labour Party conference, of taking Royal Mail back into public ownership. That could have put real pressure on Sunak’s Tory government who have backed Royal Mail bosses.”

To be continued



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact