

How the “friends” of Royal Mail workers helped the CWU inflict defeat – Part 2

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The Socialist Workers Party are expert at providing tame “left-wing” criticisms of the labour and trade union bureaucracy, while serving to politically block any independent movement of the working class.

The SWP’s long-established theory of the trade unions is one that justifies the bureaucracy’s domination over the working class. According to the SWP, “the bureaucracy play a contradictory role within capitalism. On the one hand, their role is to fight for the interests of workers. On the other, their function is to resolve the tensions between workers and bosses... But it is more complex than simply saying that trade union leaders’ role and experience mean that they will always mechanically sell out”. This is because, “Even only at the level of the bureaucracy, there is a range of different pressures interacting and shaping the development of any dispute... The combination of these pressures in particular moments in a dispute can tip the balance in one direction. The dynamic is not black and white.”

The “dynamic” being described is that of the SWP’s slavish defence of the bureaucracy. This was on full display at Royal Mail. While the Socialist Equality Party and the WSWS called for the formation of rank-and-file committees to draw up strike demands and seize control of the dispute from the CWU bureaucracy, the SWP disarmed postal workers in the face of an impending betrayal. Less than three weeks before the CWU unveiled its pro-company agreement, it posted an article, “CWU union leaders could call new Royal Mail strikes,” urging them to launch “hard hitting action to bring Thompson and the board to their knees.”

The CWU bureaucracy were then deep in talks with Royal Mail at ACAS, facilitated by former Trades Union Congress president Sir Brendan Barber, aimed at retaining their long-standing partnership with the company. Its only disagreement with workplace revisions was that they were being implemented unilaterally, instead of via agreement with CWU national officials.

After the negotiators’ agreement was published, the SWP adapted to workers’ angry denunciations of Ward and Furey. An April 21 article, “It will take organisation to stop this deal”, presented the fight entirely in organisational terms, urging only that “Workers should vote to reject the deal when it is put to a ballot—and demand more, harder-hitting strikes immediately.” But who was going to organise such strikes? The SWP’s suggestion that a “No” vote would pressure the bureaucracy to escalate the struggle was pure fantasy. Most workers who later voted for the agreement did so because they recognised a “no” vote by itself would not defeat the surrender document under conditions where the CWU executive was already implementing the company’s savage assault.

Spooked by the prominence of the WSWS and the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee, the SWP rushed to promote a series of bogus “rank-and-file” initiatives, including Postal Workers Say Vote No, NHS Workers Say Vote No and Strike Map. These united the SWP with sections of the trade union bureaucracy, Corbynites and other pseudo-left groups such as Counterfire and Workers Power to direct rank-and-file

opposition back behind the bureaucracy.

On April 25, the *Socialist Worker* reported one such event, “Build the strikes, link the fights, reject bad deals”. It cited a key participant from the National Education Union (NEU) who explained the group’s purpose was to “push trade union leaders to move forward”. The SWP urged support for a model resolution by Strike Map’s steering group (aligned politically to Corbyn) calling on the “leading bodies” of the NEU, Royal College of Nursing, and British Medical Association to “coordinate future strike dates” and “force action from the government”. The unions’ “leading bodies” took no notice of such appeals. Both the NEU and RCN cancelled industrial action to ram through below-inflation pay deals negotiated with the Sunak government.

Workers Power

Workers Power, a splinter group from the SWP buried in the Labour Party, played a critical role for the CWU bureaucracy in heading off a genuine rank-and-file rebellion.

On April 21, Workers Power member Andy Young, a CWU rep from Leeds sacked during the dispute, wrote to the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee (PWRFC) asking to join. He was invited to attend its Zoom meeting on April 23, where he opposed the committee’s formation, claiming it was “premature”. He then voted to abstain on the committee’s resolution adopted by postal workers in attendance, “Organise to defeat CWU-Royal Mail agreement: Vote NO! Reinstate all victimised workers! Build the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee!”

The next day, Young set up “Postal Workers Say Vote No”, a Facebook group which attracted hundreds of postal workers based on its purported opposition to the CWU’s surrender document.

On May 3, Young wrote again to the PWRFC, asking it to support the “no” campaign initiated by Workers Power, including financial help to distribute a “model motion” drafted for CWU branches. The model motion typified the two-faced character of Young’s group. It began with the claim that, “The Business, Recovery, Growth and Transformation Agreement has blocked a few of the worst policies Royal Mail tried to impose on workers and our union, but it has conceded on others and is a big step back in terms of pay, terms and conditions, and guarantees.”

The PWRFC replied to Young:

“Your opposition to the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee reflects your defence of the bureaucracy. That is why you refused to endorse the committee’s resolution. You cited at our meeting the 2007 ‘vote no’ initiative by you and other activists as a model for the ‘open campaign’ you are proposing—based on its endorsement by a lone member of CWU’s postal executive which supposedly ‘allowed us to launch it on a much larger scale’. This is a rebellion on one’s knees. It ended in defeat

and blocked a genuine fight by postal workers.

“Your real aim is an alliance with a faction of the bureaucracy against the workers. At our meeting, you stated that a ‘no’ campaign must be based on a ‘united front’ with workers, reps and CWU ‘officials that want to reject the deal, as long as they put no conditions on that’. But where are these phantom officials? You have invented an opposition from CWU officials so that you can rule out a struggle against this bureaucracy.

“The Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee is open to all workers who want to defeat the CWU’s sell-out deal. We will not allow the committee’s freedom of action to be compromised by the types of alliances and backroom manoeuvres that typify the efforts of your Workers Power group, the SWP and similar outfits that function as ‘left’ advisors to the trade union bureaucracy.”

Workers Power used the Postal Workers Say Vote No group to promote fruitless appeals to the CWU national officials and reps who were busy enforcing Royal Mail’s dictates. After the CWU pushed through its sellout deal, the group announced a name change to Postal Workers Say No (PWSN), explaining their aims as follows: “We are not a genuine rank and file network much less movement yet, but aim to build for one”.

This “aim” cannot even be regarded as aspirational. PWSN’s July 27 statement outlined the group’s support for the bureaucracy in unmistakable terms: “We will support all positive efforts by the union leaders eg [sic] organising drives to rebuild membership, but oppose them whenever they fail to defend workers interests or move against them.”

It stated that PWSN would also, “Expose backsliding from the deal” [!] adding, “We can critically support opposition candidates that gain members’ support by promising a more fighting policy (even if they called for a yes vote).”

Conclusion

The 2022-23 Royal Mail dispute was part of a developing wave of class struggle across the UK and worldwide driven by the deepest cost-of-living crisis in decades. Workers set out to defeat savage demands for corporate restructuring by shareholders and investors dictated by the capitalist market. All over the world, the working class is coming into head-on conflict with the bureaucracy of the trade unions, which have transformed over the past four decades from defensive organisations of the working class into arms of corporate management and the state.

The growth of corporatism in the trade unions was analysed by Leon Trotsky, co-leader of the Russian Revolution and founder of the Fourth International, more than 80 years ago. He wrote: “There is one common feature in the development, or more correctly the degeneration, of modern trade union organizations in the entire world: it is their drawing closely to and growing together with the state power.” He explained, “Monopoly capitalism is less and less willing to reconcile itself to the independence of the trade unions. It demands of the reformist bureaucracy and the labour aristocracy who pick the crumbs from its banquet table, that they become transformed into its political police before the eyes of the working class.”

Corporatism has since become fully entrenched in the trade unions of all countries; a process accelerated over the past four decades by the globalisation of capitalist production. Digital communications technology has enabled the capitalist class to scour the globe, locate production wherever labour costs are lowest and integrate the production process across national borders. The nationally based trade union and labour bureaucracies, defending capitalism as the source of their privileges, have responded by repudiating their old reformist programs, insisting that workers must accept the destruction of their wages, conditions and living standards so that the corporations can be “globally competitive.” Hence

the CWU’s demand that postal workers “sacrifice” to save Royal Mail from bankruptcy, i.e., protect shareholder profit. No matter how much workers give up today, it will never be enough, as “the market” demands an increased return on investment each year. Failure to deliver is punished in the form of credit downgrades and the withdrawal of funds as billionaires like Daniel Kretinsky move vulture-like to find new sources of profit.

These facts of modern-day capitalism dictate the political tasks before the working class, showing the necessity for an international socialist strategy. The overthrow of the capitalist oligarchy and the reorganisation of global economy to meet human need not private profit is posed as an urgent task.

The determined, year-long battle at Royal Mail has provided an object lesson in the pro-capitalist politics of the pseudo-left. The SWP, SP and Workers Power emerged historically from petty-bourgeois tendencies which broke from Trotskyism and the Fourth International in the post-World War II period. Adapting themselves to the temporary stabilisation of capitalism, they rejected the struggle to build an international revolutionary party of the working class. All that could be accomplished, they insisted, was to place pressure in the existing Stalinist and reformist leaderships to fight for reforms, through strikes and other forms of protest.

The restoration of capitalism by the Stalinist bureaucracy in the former Soviet Union, the abandonment of reformism by the Labour Party and their naked embrace of capitalism, and the corporatist degeneration of the trade unions has blown this perspective apart. It has seen the pseudo-left tendencies lurch ever further to the right in their role as the last line of defence for the bureaucracy.

The PWRFC and the IWA-RFC provides the vehicle for organizing the struggles of the working class and the political strategy this demands:

1) Complete independence from the trade union bureaucracy and the Labour Party. Not the futile perspective of stiffening the spine of Ward and company, but the building of an insurgent movement of the rank-and-file to break their stranglehold and drive them from office.

2) For an international struggle by the working class against the common enemy. Instead of a fratricidal contest over who will sacrifice most in the interest of the corporations and shareholders, unity with all workers throughout the UK and internationally who are fighting in defence of their jobs, wages and conditions.

To take this fight forward means building a new socialist leadership in the working class. This is the most important lesson from the struggle at Royal Mail.

Concluded



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