Royal Mail’s new regime: PDAs used to sack workers for tea break at local pub

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Do you have any information about the sackings at Prenton Delivery Office or the use of PDAs to victimise workers? Get in touch using the form below. Your anonymity will be protected.

Postal workers from Royal Mail’s Prenton Delivery Office say the company used tracking information taken from hand-held devices—Postal Digital Assistants (PDAs)—to sack colleagues for drinking tea and coffee during their legally entitled break times at two local pubs.

11 workers were suspended last month after drinking tea and coffee at the Caernarvon Castle and The Swan. On August 11, six of them were dismissed, while another was given a penalty, and three were reinstated. The fate of an eleventh worker is unknown. At least one other worker has resigned in protest.

Prenton is a small office with just 45 staff who deliver mail to 15,000 people in Birkenhead, Merseyside. The rounds are long, with few decent toilet and rest facilities.

Royal Mail workers in Prenton told the *World Socialist Web Site* that both pubs have been used by delivery staff for many years, “Me and my mate used to go to the Caernarvon Castle for a cup of tea. We went in there one day, it was lashing down, and we were covered in water. The woman who owns it said, ‘Do you want a cup of tea?’ So from then, we went in there for a cup of tea every day.

“Other lads started going in there. No problem, no anti-social behaviour. We were just sitting and having a cup of tea, and a catch up on everything with the other posties. What happens then is they got told [by management] ‘you are not allowed to mingle there’.

“The next day they went to The Swan car park instead, and they all got called in the next day, and they all got suspended the next day.”

Locals at both pubs have spoken out, defending the sacked posties and calling for their reinstatement. Caernarvon regular Ian Harris told the *Liverpool Echo*: “There wasn’t any alcohol whatsoever and we the regulars liked to see them.”

On Wednesday, the *Echo* reported, “Though both pubs are on a list permitted by Royal Mail for breaks, disagreement remains over whether they were on everyone’s delivery route.”

Postal workers told WSWS that management had used PDAs to identify workers for disciplinary action. The devices were used to carry out staff surveillance at both the Caernarvon Castle and the Swan.

Royal Mail’s suspensions and dismissals are a direct product of the Business Recovery, Growth and Transformation Agreement negotiated by Communication Workers Union (CWU) officials and Royal Mail at conciliation service ACAS.

Appendix 5 of the union-company agreement outlined measures for enhanced “performance management” of staff to deliver “improved business performance” through increased “data use” from PDAs. The CWU’s assurances that PDAs would “not be used to de-humanise the workplace” and would “not be used to track individuals in real time” have been exposed as worthless.

The use of PDAs to discipline, intimidate and sack workers is the outcome of Ward and Furey’s betrayal of the year-long dispute. More than 115,000 Royal Mail workers launched 18 days of strikes against the company’s brutal workplace revisions. But the CWU’s pro-company agreement is unleashing the biggest attacks on postal workers’ terms and conditions in history, overseen by Joint Working Groups and other union-management committees.

A postal worker from Prenton explained, “It used to be a good place. But the stuff that’s going on now is just shocking.” He said staff at the local office had been subjected to non-stop bullying over the past two years to push through impossible new workloads.

“The way you get treated, it’s shocking, honest to god. It’s just not a nice place to work, the atmosphere in there’s terrible. In the last 12 to 18 months, 12 people have been sacked. Four people have just left because they’ve had enough and walked away. Some of them had 30 years’ service. They’re taking on loads of casuals and other people now. The old office, basically it’s gone.”

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Workers agreed that management was targeting senior staff.

Mark Walsh, head of the CWU's Greater Mersey branch, told the *Liverpool Echo*, "Most of the dismissed postmen have worked for Royal Mail for over 20 years, with one colleague working for the business for over 44 years, all of them with exemplary service and clear conduct records."

He added, "The branch is currently exchanging correspondence with our national headquarters to ensure we explore all options available to support our colleagues in their time of need." Walsh said the CWU would support the sacked workers to clear their names and win reinstatement.

But postal workers can have no faith in these claims. The CWU national executive has abandoned hundreds of victimised reps and other workers sacked or suspended during the dispute. Their fate is to be determined by Lord Falconer of Thoroton who advised the National Coal Board during the 1984-85 miners' strike. The Falconer Review's terms of reference, shrouded in secrecy, were agreed by the CWU and Royal Mail executives in February.

The suspensions and sackings at Prenton have cut delivery staff there by a quarter, causing huge postal delays for residents, many of whom are elderly.

An online petition launched three days ago called "Reinstate Prenton's Posties", has already gathered more than 1,500 signatures, with hundreds of supportive comments posted by signatories. "It is a ridiculous reason for suspending postmen, who served us well throughout the pandemic and have worked for us for years," wrote Moira Gommon. Christine Edwards wrote, "We can't let the post office get away with this kind treatment to their staff for taking a tea break together! Where will it all end?" Belinda Clair commented, "Management need disciplining not the postmen".

On Wednesday afternoon, WSWS reporters found widespread support for the sacked postmen outside Sainsbury's in Prenton.

Ramsey, a retired worker, said, "It is their right to have a break after four hours. I was in the management for a long time at Ramada hotels, but we used to have a break every four hours. It was an established practice. It is mandatory. That is known in the trade unions and law.

"This is the problem with privatisation. It's about making profit. Not caring for customers or the workers. It's capitalism, liberal capitalism. The whole of Europe is crumbling from it. It's what the banks dictate, not the workers. It's the people with the cash who call the shots.

"Yes, they should be reinstated. That is a flagrant breach of their human rights. It's bonkers."

Steven who works at a local factory heard about the sacked postal workers from WSWS reporters. He responded, "That's shocking. They will have proof that they weren't drinking. They should all be reinstated. What are they meant to do for wages, everyone's got bills to pay. Are they meant to just ride it out with no job? You can't do that these days."

"There should be on an online petition, then a lot more people would sign it and get the word out through word-of-mouth."

Linda also stopped to speak, "I'm in touch with Alan Brame, the local Lib Dem councillor and he's been dealing with it. He sent me an email yesterday to sign a petition, which I've sent to about 50 people. I hope to get the posties reinstated.

"I've had a good chat with some of the local posties who have mentioned what's happened, and it seems just poor management. It's bullying tactics." Linda said postal workers had done a "marvellous job under the circumstances. All the jobs that have been cut, and the way they mess them around with the change in the rounds, it's obviously having an impact on the local community."

She said, "Everyone has signed the petition in the local area. They've all had disruptions with the post and they're all on the side of the staff because of the way they've been treated."

The defence of the sacked Prenton delivery workers must be taken up by postal workers across Royal Mail, as part of the demand for the immediate and unconditional reinstatement of all those hundreds of workers victimised during the dispute. Rank-and-file committees should be established at delivery offices and mail centres to spearhead this campaign, defying the CWU-Royal Mail agreement. Workers must rely on their own strength. All the capitalist parties, including Labour, the Tories and Liberal Democrats, backed privatisation and are committed to the defence of shareholder profit at the expense of workers' pay, conditions, entitlements and their democratic rights, including the right to strike.

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