

Postal workers in Scotland and London vote for action as CWU-Royal Mail partnership ushers in savage attacks

Laura Tiernan**7 September 2023**

Postal workers at Royal Mail face a deluge of attacks on jobs, working conditions, pay, and entitlements as the Communication Workers Union's (CWU) national agreement takes effect. Anger is growing, with ballots for industrial action in Scotland and London only the tip of the iceberg.

At Hayes delivery office near London's Heathrow Airport, CWU members voted August 30 for strike action to fight massive company breaches of the Universal Service Obligation on letter deliveries and against "unagreed revisions" to terms and conditions. The USO guarantees six-day-a-week mail delivery for a fixed price anywhere in the UK. Scotland's Stranraer delivery office voted for action short of a strike over the same issues.

Postal workers have applauded their colleagues' stand, but Royal Mail's illegal breaches of the USO are company-wide, and postal workers have demanded to know why strike ballots are being confined to just two offices.

"Shame our national team aren't doing anything about this nationally. It's happening everywhere," a postal worker wrote on Facebook. Another wrote, "unfortunately the CWU attempts to quash local ballots to get 'the deal' over the line has only served to embolden RM management."

The CWU postal executive has repeatedly blocked "rule 13" strike votes this year, including over the victimisation and sacking of reps. Local walkouts and strike ballots were suppressed as CWU General Secretary Dave Ward and his deputy Andy Furey colluded with Royal Mail to ram through their Business Recovery, Growth and Transformation Agreement.

At Hayes and Stranraer, the wording on the CWU's ballot paper opposes "unagreed revisions". But postal workers confront revisions to terms and conditions agreed by the CWU executive in April which were downplayed and concealed in the run-up to July's national ballot. These include:

Commencement of seasonal variation to working

hours: Starting this week, full time delivery staff (including those on 35-hour contracts) are being forced to work an extra 24 minutes per day. Part timers will work an extra 10 minutes per day. Next year's introduction of "Network Window" changes will add 60-90 minutes onto duty times. Any work-life balance will be destroyed, with parents unable to collect their children from school. Posties will be delivering mail in the dark, a huge threat to safety.

In a joint statement on September 1, Royal Mail's Commercial & Field Programme Director Francis Williams and CWU Assistant Secretary Mark Baulch stated they had "agreed an approach which supports the need for Royal Mail to be more flexible in an increasingly competitive marketplace". The seasonal variation to hours would "improve productivity and efficiency and USO/services standards for customers... ensuring all workload is cleared."

The joint statement underlined the CWU's total integration with management, declaring, "It is critical that local managers and CWU reps work jointly to maximise the value of these additional hours during the High Season via the Weekly Resourcing Meetings." Other matters, including "Delivery Revisions" would be "jointly progressed and communicated."

Cuts to sick pay and new attendance regime: The agreement's new attendance procedure starts from October 1. This includes reduced sickness benefits equivalent to the Statutory Sickness Payment of £109.40 per week pro rata from the second absence. The new regime effectively criminalises sickness, with workers interrogated after every absence. The CWU's trumpeted "concession" that workers can take a CWU rep to attendance review meetings is cold comfort.

Parcelforce and the single parcel network: Changes agreed by the CWU at Parcelforce are spearheading Royal Mail's plans for an "Optimised Single Parcel Network". In a "Joint Statement between Royal Mail Group and the CWU Covering the Deployment of Parcelforce Rural Parcel

Volumes Into Royal Mail”, CWU Assistant Secretary Davie Robertson and Assistant Secretary Mick Kavanagh revealed how far the CWU bureaucracy has gone in helping Royal Mail’s transformation into a direct competitor of Amazon.

Sounding like HR directors, they announced that “agreed trial activity has taken place involving the movement of rural parcel traffic from PFW Leeds LD to Skipton DO for delivery to support assessment for a potential future Optimised Single Parcel Network.” And that “Further to a successful outcome of the abovementioned trial, Royal Mail now wish to assess the potential for a further 41 Delivery Offices to deliver PFW items, with the aim to move these volumes before the 2023 peak period.”

In other words, parcels previously delivered by Parcelforce will be piled on top of already impossible workloads experienced at delivery offices. Kavanagh and Robertson announced, “the activity is being planned in 5 Waves” and that “41 RM Delivery Offices and related PFW local depots [are] involved”. They write, “Adjustments [!] will be made to affected Royal Mail Delivery duties to ensure that the PFW workload can be accommodated within current structures, while retaining manageable workload.” Only shameless company stooges can write like this.

From head office to workplace reps, the CWU is wedded to management: “CWU representatives will be fully involved in the activity with appropriate Union release time provided to ensure meaningful involvement. The activity will be further supported by the CWU Area Delivery Representative and Area H&S Representative and Parcelforce Regional Organiser.”

Productivity will be closely monitored: “RM DO’s will receive the relevant WIPWH (Weighted Items Per Work Hour) workload values relating to delivery and collection of PFW volumes.” Needless to say, Kavanagh and Robertson will not themselves have to move any weighted items per work hour, but they will be available to ensure that “learning points from the PIR [Post Implementation Review] will inform National discussions on the next phase of deployments into another 54 Delivery Offices, which have been identified for the transfer of rural workload.”

As for workers staring unemployment in the face, the CWU writes nonchalantly, “PFW Drivers displaced as a result of the transfer of work to Royal Mail will migrate to vacant alternative substantive C&D routes, or routes covered by Owner Drivers or external resource. All headcount reduction will be achieved in line with paragraph 3.1.9 of the Job Security section of the Business Recovery, Transformation and Growth Agreement.”

“Surplus” staff: Hundreds, if not thousands, of staff have been designated “surplus” due to reduced hours at customer service points, along with changes resulting from new super

hubs. The CWU is keeping tight-lipped about the numbers involved to prevent any struggle to defend these workers’ jobs. It has made clear nothing will be done to challenge Royal Mail’s reduction of CSPs, a prelude to their eventual closure.

Last week the *Times* newspaper reported that 1,000 Royal Mail workers are leaving the business every month, with 25,000 agency workers currently in place. The exodus will grow next month after the lump sum payment (promised in exchange for endorsing the CWU-Royal Mail agreement) is finally paid. Senior workers are being driven out and replaced by new entrants on inferior pay, terms and conditions agreed by the CWU. It is “fire and rehire” through the back door.

Amid this catastrophe for Royal Mail workers, Dave Ward and Andy Furey have launched a recruitment drive in a bid to reverse the CWU’s collapse in membership. Ward has appealed for branches to “commence intensive recruitment activity... targeting new entrants to the business”, urging them to “hit the ground running”. Their doomed recruitment drive has met widespread derision.

The Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee is holding an online meeting on Sunday September 24, at 7pm to discuss the situation at Royal Mail and to build the rank-and-file movement against the CWU’s pro-company alliance with Royal Mail. The meeting will discuss the campaign for the unconditional reinstatement of all reps and postal workers victimised, sacked and suspended during the dispute. Register here to attend.

Do you have information about conditions at your workplace? Share your views by submitting the form below. Submissions will be published anonymously.



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