

Communication Workers Union joins regulator Ofcom in review to end Royal Mail's six-day letter delivery service

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The Communication Workers Union (CWU) announced in a September 5 letter to branches its full participation in regulator Ofcom's review and consultation into the Universal Service Obligation (USO).

Ofcom's position is no mystery regarding the abandoning of Royal Mail's statutory obligation to deliver letters to 32 million households across the UK, six days a week at a standard price. The regulator greenlighted the ending of Saturday mail deliveries already in 2020, scrapping the one area in which Royal Mail was meant to provide a public service after privatisation in 2013.

The company has already drawn attention to this seal of approval in its press release on the present review which conforms entirely to its business interests. Lindsey Fussell, Ofcom's networks communications group director, stated in 2020 that research showed "people's needs would still be met" with the cost reductions estimated at between £125-225 million.

CWU leaders Dave Ward and Andy Furey's justification for the union's participation in this rigged process is an insult to all postal workers: "We want this review to seek and take on board the views of our members who have witnessed first hand the running down of the USO. We want any outcome to be based not on potential shareholder profit but on the protection of the service, jobs, and future of the company."

Their real attitude to the membership and the service was demonstrated by the CWU's ramming through its pro-company agreement on July 11, betraying the year-long struggle mounted by over 100,000 workers. The Business Recovery, Transformation and Growth Agreement (BTRG) is based exclusively on restoring "shareholder profit", turning the clock back on postal workers' hard-won rights and establishing a new benchmark of exploitation to compete with Amazon as a parcel-led operation.

Ward and Furey's cynical claims were met with derision from postal workers on the CWU Facebook page when the announcement was posted: "And you as a Union are as complicit as RM [Royal Mail] for allowing this to happen"; "I have absolutely no faith in the CWU to tie their own shoelaces

let alone protect the USO. You jumped into bed with RM over this agreement, in my book you're part of the problem!"

The CWU adopted the most bureaucratic methods to enforce the sellout, including riding roughshod over a 96 percent renewed strike mandate in February and twice postponing the ballot on the agreement in May to forestall its rejection. Opposition was worn down to the point that a third of members abstained in the final vote, with Ward and Furey denouncing opponents of their surrender document as "delusional" and making clear they had no Plan B in the event of a majority no vote.

Any claim that the yes vote represented a popular endorsement of the agreement has been refuted by the conduct of Ward and Furey since, who have effectively gone to ground. So called "engagement" with the membership consists of a non-stop barrage of communications based on CWU-RM joint statements over the implementation of the sweatshop charter agreed, overseen through joint union-management working groups.

They also include notifications of how the company is pressing ahead with "unagreed" changes not contained within the BRT&G agreement. These include a redeployment pool in Mail Centres to enforce redundancies and halving the opening hours of 1,200 Customer Service Points. The CWU bureaucracy is trying to evade responsibility for the free rein granted management by its abject betrayal.

Just as the sellout agreement was hatched through the state arbitration service ACAS, Ofcom is being used to rationalise Royal Mail and the CWU's ditching of the USO. In a less guarded moment in June, at the height of the browbeating exercise to enforce the BTRG agreement, Ward stated it was time to consider "a five-day scenario" for mail delivery.

Attempts to present the proposal as a way to reduce job losses are obscene. The CWU allowed Royal Mail to implement 10,000 redundancies over the past year even as its members were in dispute with the company. The implication is that as part of the rotten deal the union has agreed behind the backs of workers to an even more extensive jobs cull.

Particularly sickening is Ward and Furey's posturing over the

“deliberate run down of the USO.” The precursor to the sellout agreement to end the dispute was a CWU-Royal Mail joint statement in March pledging re-engagement with revisions—the “biggest revision ever in the history of this business”, according to the company’s Chief Operating Officer Grant McPherson. It is these cost-cutting exercises, removing duties and increasing workloads, which have crashed the USO.

Now workers are being made scapegoats. Postal workers have informed the *World Socialist Web Site* that disciplinary action has been taken against staff unable to complete their unachievable workloads, as parcels are prioritised over letters.

The historic decline in letter mail is routinely cited as requiring the reduction of the USO, but Royal Mail has conceded in its own statement on the Ofcom review that postal workers are having to deliver to more addresses: “Letter volumes have fallen by more than 60% since their peak—from 20 billion in 2004/5 to 7 billion a year in 2022/3—while the number of addresses has risen by four million in the same period.”

What matters to Royal Mail is not “modernisation” but using technology to deepen the exploitation of postal workers while reducing the service in the least profitable side of its operations. At its recent shareholders AGM, Royal Mail Chair Keith Willaims bemoaned the fact that letter delivery only accounted for 30 percent of profits, with the rest from parcels.

Royal Mail has already been able to trash its statutory obligation for an extended period. The last time it reached its targets for both first and second-class deliveries in the same year was 2016/17, yet it was only fined £1.5 million by Ofcom in 2019—barely a slap on the wrist.

The company failed to meet its delivery targets in any post code across the UK this summer, with households in some areas waiting up to two weeks for mail. Research published in June by Citizens Advice showed that 7.3 million households had suffered due to delays, missing health appointments, fines and bills.

Profits for Royal Mail—now the UK arm of the transnational International Distribution Services IDS—have continued to be siphoned off by investors and equity groups. Multi-billionaire Daniel Kretinsky of Vesa Equity has been paid £100 million in dividends since 2021 by IDS, according to *The Times*.

The CWU’s mantra of “mutual interest solutions” between workers and the company is a fraud. The only shared interests are those between the pro-company union apparatus and the shareholders demanding it police opposition from below.

Postal workers should also reject the CWU’s attempts to present the right-wing, pro-business Labour Party as a friend. Bristol North West MP Darren Jones was hailed by Ward as a saviour for his performances as chair of the House of Commons business select committee supposedly holding Royal Mail chief executive Simon Thompson to account. Based on postal workers’ testimony, Jones challenged Thompson at hearings over issues such as prioritisation of parcels over mail, the use of

PDA technology to manage performance and threats to sick pay.

All of this has in fact been formalised and integrated into the BTRG document which Jones has publicly backed. He was given a standing ovation at the CWU briefing to announce the rotten deal on April 21.

The agreement is a prime example of the type of business-government-union collaboration against the working class promoted by party leader Sir Keir Starmer at last year’s TUC conference: “I’m not just pro-business, I want to partner with business to drive Britain forward... And I will say the same about trade unions to the CBI [Confederation of British Industry].”

The union bureaucracy is at one with Labour’s demands for increased productivity and greater competitiveness for UK corporations, and its hostility to any challenged to the plunder of social wealth by the super rich at workers’ expense. Jones was recently promoted to Shadow Chief Secretary of the Treasury in Starmer’s Blairite cabinet reshuffle; he will play a key role in Shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves department for continued Tory austerity. The CWU congratulated him on his success.

The Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee (PWRFC) is advancing a strategy to fight back. The allies of Royal Mail workers are not the accomplices of billionaire shareholders in the Labour and trade union bureaucracy, but postal and logistics workers worldwide engaged in fight against the same corporate race to the bottom. Royal Mail must be nationalised under workers’ control, its massive profits used to provide decent wages and working conditions and a quality universal delivery service to the public.

We encourage all postal workers to attend the next online meeting of the PWRFC on **Sunday September 24 at 7pm** to discuss the way forward in organising opposition to the sweatshop charter agreed between the CWU and Royal Mail, including the fight for the unconditional reinstatement of all victimised reps and workers against the stitch-up of the Falconer review.

Register for the September 24 online meeting of the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee here.



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