Prenton Royal Mail workers vote to strike to reinstate four colleagues victimised for taking their tea breaks

Tony Robson
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Postal workers at Prenton delivery office in north-west England have voted to strike, demanding four colleagues sacked by Royal Mail for taking their contractually entitled tea break are reinstated.

Members of the Communication Workers Union (CWU) in the suburb of Birkenhead on the Wirral voted by a majority of 95.8 percent on a 70.6 percent turnout in a result announced on October 24.

A total of 11 delivery workers were originally suspended by Royal Mail in July for taking their tea breaks at local pubs. They were singled out by management after following what had been an accepted practice with delivery workers on long walks with few amenities to take breaks or access toilets. None had been drinking alcohol, as confirmed by other customers.

According to the CWU, Royal Mail confirmed earlier this month that four of the delivery workers would be dismissed, including one with "a 44-year unblemished history".

A CWU press release announcing the strike vote is clearly framed at preventing any strike from taking place, emphasising its partnership with management. It stated, "The union is demanding that management get back around the negotiating table to work out a solution where all workers will be reinstated."

"A CWU spokesperson said: 'This situation won't be solved by management doubling down on poorly-handled decisions, but with a decent compromise that sees these workers reinstated and the workforce treated with the respect they deserve.'"

It insultingly describes the vote as an action reflecting "an already demoralised workforce of around 30 employees - as well as in the wider community, which has been subject to persistent postal delays due to under-recruitment and management cuts."

As the coverage of the WSWS has shown, the fight of Prenton postal workers against victimisation has won support among the 15,000 people served by the delivery office.

Every postal worker knows the "culture of bullying and mismanagement in the workplace" referred to at Prenton is rife across Royal Mail Group (RMG). The chief mechanism for imposing this regime and preventing any fight against it is the CWU bureaucracy led by Dave Ward and Andy Furey.

The management offensive at Prenton delivery office is a product of the rotten deal drawn up between the CWU and Royal Mail in July to end the year-long fight by more than 100,000 postal workers. As with other Rule 13 mandates for local strikes, most recently at Hayes in London and Stranraer in Scotland, the Preston vote will be sat on. The votes of the membership only count when bludgeoning through a sellout, not when fighting against the tearing up of terms ushered in by the CWU-Royal Mail Business Recovery, Transformation and Growth Agreement (BRTG).

The victimisations at Prenton are a test case for imposing the new regime of Amazon style practices agreed by the CWU with Royal Mail management in the BRTG Agreement. The data from the hand-held tracker system used by delivery workers, Postal Digital Assistants or PDAs, was used by management to identify delivery workers taking their breaks at The Swan and Carnarvon Castle public houses to take disciplinary action.

A cornerstone of the BRTG Agreement is the use of the PDAs to increase management surveillance and enforce productivity increases through the "My Performance" APP/Tile added to the tracker, which the CWU agreed to trial through the Joint Working Party. Appendix 5, on "Data Use and Performance Management," describes in

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Point 3 the "Pilot approach – New PDA APP/Tile" as having the "objective of raising awareness of individual contribution" and "enabling higher levels of customer service and business performance."

With further jobs losses in addition to the 10,000 already pushed through during the dispute, and with the most sweeping revisions in the history of the company hiking up workloads, this increased surveillance was always intended as a mechanism for disciplining workers.

Royal Mail confirmed on October 3 the new APP/Tile will now be extended to 332 units and 25,600 delivery workers in parts of England and Scotland. In conjunction with the Big Brother approach to monitoring individual performance, delivery workers will now be placed in Gold, Silver, Bronze and Purple categories, with the stated aim rolling this out across RMG.

This institutionalises management intimidation, as shown by the criteria for placing a delivery worker in the lowest Purple category, which includes:

"Regularly displays a negative or defeatist attitude at work which affects others."

"Requires multiple prompts or reminders before taking action on wellbeing and the impact on others."

The CWU did not issue a statement on this until October 13, just days before it was rolled out. It was a hand ringing exercise claiming it was not happening with CWU's agreement as it did not include the "BRT&G safeguards".

The most popular comments on the CWU Facebook page show that postal workers are not buying into this fraud. They include: "Just like to thank The Communication Workers Union for getting us the same conditions as Amazon, some people thought it couldn't be done! So well done CWU, pass on my thanks to Dave Ward when you eventually find him!" and "Well you put us in this position by encouraging people to vote yes [to the BTRG deal]."

The opposition to institutionalised management intimidation and entrenchment of Amazon style practices must be joined with the fight for the unconditional reinstatement of some 400 CWU reps and members suspended and sacked during the year long dispute.

The warnings made the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee (PWRFC) that the Falconer Review into these suspensions and sackings is to prevent a collective fight for justice for all those victimised by Royal Mail have been vindicated.

Three months after the end of the dispute the CWU has agreed to extending a news embargo for weeks on even reporting the decision on the first 26 cases, supposedly to allow time for further discussions between all parties on reaching a "Collective Agreement to resolve all cases." The CWU has submitted only 200 cases.

The CWU has placed Tony Blair's Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice Lord Falconer in sole charge of reviewing the biggest frame-up of workers in an industrial dispute in two generations. Blair's former flatmate had previously advised the National Coal Board on outlawing flying pickets and how to recognise the scab Union of Democratic Mineworkers during the 1984-5 miners' strike.

The PWRFC's call for an independent fight for the full reinstatement of victimised reps and workers explained the real purpose of the Falconer Review was "1) to sweep the explosive issue of workplace victimisations under the carpet, blocking any industrial and political fight for reinstatement; and 2) enabling Royal Mail and the CWU to implement their national agreement against the workforce."

The stitch-up of the Falconer review has paved the way for what postal workers describe as "a second wave of victimisations."

The mandate for strike action at Prenton should become the spearhead of a mobilisation of postal workers nationally to overturn the CWU's rotten agreement with Royal Mail and remove its co-authors Ward and Furey from office. This must be the first step in dismantling the union apparatus, with power placed in the hands of the rank and file.

Postal workers must draw up independent demands, refusing to sacrifice their terms and rights for the brutal restructuring to gauge out more profits for the major shareholders and investors. Rather than dues of the membership being siphoned off to the six figure salaries of the bureaucrats, they must be used to fund a programme of strike action in which the rank-and-file determine the strategy to fight.

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