

CWU General Secretary Dave Ward slammed by postal workers during LBC radio show

Tony Robson
20 December 2023

Dave Ward, General Secretary of the Communication Workers Union (CWU), appeared on LBC Radio last Thursday in a one-hour interview and phone-in show, billed by the union as an opportunity to address the crisis-ridden state of the postal service at Royal Mail.

The privatised utility was found by regulator Ofcom to have breached its statutory requirements under the Universal Service Obligation (USO) to deliver letters six days a week at one price across the UK. For staggering failures right across the country, the company received the financial equivalent of a slap on the wrist with a £5.6 million fine. The whitewash was completed by Royal Mail's being cleared of prioritising more lucrative parcels over letter delivery.

For the best part of the year, Royal Mail frontline delivery workers have been calling out the institutionalisation of this practice and the management bullying culture created to force workers to breach the USO. Their protests found no organised expression through the CWU as it deepened its collusion with the company to enforce cost-cutting revisions—removing duties and increasing workloads—and sabotaged the year-long national dispute by 115,000 Royal Mail workers ending with a rotten pro-company agreement enforced in July.

The Business Recovery, Transformation and Growth Agreement (BRTG Agreement) has set in motion a scorched-earth policy of transforming the mail service into a single 24/7 parcel network, with the imposition of Amazon-style terms and conditions.

Postal workers' anger over this historic betrayal is still widely felt. The sweatshop conditions ushered in have taken an awful toll. *The Times* reported in September that 1,000 Royal Mail workers were leaving the business every month.

Ward was not going to be allowed to profess opposition to the “deliberate dismantling of the USO” without postal workers indicting him and the CWU Postal Executive for their complicity in the collapse of the letters service and destruction of jobs, terms and conditions on behalf of the executives and shareholders of Royal Mail, and parent company International Distribution Services (IDS).

LBC host Iain Dale began a call-in section by reading a “representative sample” of three texts and email messages by posties of 20 years or more experience. They were all scathing of the CWU's sell-out of their fight and gave expression to sentiments shared by thousands, stating that the only announcement Ward should be making is his own resignation.

“How can you claim to represent us?”

Robin stated, “I'm a postal worker of 22 years in Hatfield and I'd like to ask Dave Ward a question. After you convinced us to go on strike for 18 days last year only to cave in and work with Royal Mail to impose harmful change to our terms and conditions how can you claim to represent us?”

“Since the agreement the CWU and you have been nowhere to be seen, morale has plummeted and the mental health of thousands of us has been shattered. When was the last time you set foot in a delivery office, when will you Dave Ward resign and allow us to elect a new leader who genuinely represents us?”

The other two messages spoke of “workers at Royal Mail sold down the river”, “the worst conditions and pay we've ever had” and the CWU “cave-in to every demand,” including later start and finishing times wrecking the lives of young families and carers, a two-tier workforce with worse terms for new entrants, unresolved workloads and prioritisation of tracked parcels.

Ward was incapable of any coherent response. He clung to the threadbare claim that the CWU had mitigated all Royal Mail's “proposals”, singling out later start and finishing times and stating the company had been pushed back from demanding three hours to 60/90 minutes. He parroted the company line that the transfer of mail carrying across the UK from flights to road and rail is animated by a “green agenda”, rather than dictated by profit and the drive to restructure the company as predominantly a parcel courier service.

Arguing that postal workers had had their say, Ward cited the “fact 75 percent of our members did vote for the deal”. This omits how Ward and company trampled over the will of the members, beginning with their veto of a far bigger 96 percent mandate in February to resume strike action. This paved the way for talks with Royal Mail executives organised by the arbitration service ACAS which hatched the sell-out agreement behind members' backs.

From April, when the terms of the BRTG Agreement were published and dubbed by postal workers a “surrender document”, Ward, his deputy Andy Furey and CWU officials intervened twice to pull the ballot to forestall a rejection. The “engagement exercise” which followed involved witch-hunting those calling for a No vote as “reckless” and threatening the livelihoods of postal workers. The CWU had allowed the company to implement 10,000 redundancies while the dispute was live, a downpayment on the

brutal restructuring agenda it has agreed.

“I’m wondering when the CWU is going to grow some teeth”

A new starter on a 30-hour contract, Pat from Warwick, commented, “I’m wondering when the CWU is going to grow some teeth,” referencing his denial of paid overtime and exclusion from the £1,500 lump sum included as part of the agreement.

Ward’s response should be taken as an example of how new entrants on inferior terms will be treated by CWU officials, who have used the agreement to cement their roles as industrial policemen for the company. Without establishing any of the facts, he replied on the lump sum that Pat “obviously did not start in the period you would have qualified.”

He went on to admit that Royal Mail had started to introduce recruitment on inferior terms during the dispute, but added this was “not an issue we could sustain the dispute on”. This is an outrageous statement. Workers took strike action after being balloted on opposing a two-tier workforce and race to the bottom.

Ward then claimed, “We need to recruit people on the same conditions” and that this is “what the agreement says”. This is a lie. The BRTG Agreement states that the joint CWU-Royal Mail working party will review over 6 months “a potential new grade for new entrants” based on pay and conditions set by the company’s “competitors” (Amazon, Evri) to “establish the quantum for cost-based reductions.”

This has set a new benchmark of inferior terms for new entrants, including unpaid meals breaks, not receiving the “functional supplement” in delivery of up to £30 per week and mandatory Sunday working.

“I’m still waiting for my agreement”

Dave from Sheffield, part of Fleet maintenance at Royal Mail, put Ward on the spot about the fact that they were still without an agreement: “I wanted to know what Dave’s opinion was, this agreement I’ve heard him speak about this past hour, I don’t know what he is talking about because I’m still waiting for my agreement.”

Ward was not prepared to commit to anything other than that the CWU remained in closed-door talks with management, stating, “fairly soon we’d get an agreement, what we want is to ensure it is still you guys that are doing the work.”

In other words, after Fleet workers voted down half a year ago what is now Appendix 4 of the BRTG Agreement, providing for expanded outsourcing and inferior terms for new entrants, the CWU reserves the right to keep them in the dark and with the threat of losing their jobs hanging over them. This precarious situation is being exploited by the CWU to justify concessions to keep the work in house.

On the vital question of defending the USO, Ward’s comments exposed how the union bureaucracy is providing a rationale for it to proceed. Paying lip service to the importance of Royal Mail retaining a “universal service,” he added it was down to “economics” (i.e., profitability) whether it could be retained “in its current format.”

Speaking like a company executive, Ward touted the wild earnings to be made from Royal Mail’s infrastructure built up to meet the USO. “As much as I am not a fan of people like Elon Musk or Jeff Bezos, could you imagine what they would do if they were running a company and they had that infrastructure in place?”

The CWU has already agreed to a reduction to a five-day service. Newly elected CWU Deputy General Secretary (postal) Martin Walsh declared that the six-day USO “is now past its sell-by date.”

Postal workers did not buy Walsh’s claims that this would “build a sustainable and better future”, coming from a member of the Postal Executive who helped ram the pro-company agreement through. Ward’s new sidekick received just 10 percent of the eligible vote, underscoring the divide separating the rank-and-file from the union hierarchy.

The snapshot provided by LBC’s radio show demonstrates the simmering opposition among postal workers to the sabotage carried out by the pro-company bureaucracy headed by Ward. In only the latest example, it was announced on December 15 that mandated industrial action over Christmas and New Year by Customer Experience call centre staff, against enforced changes to working practices, had been withdrawn by the CWU to mark a “truce” with the company.

The Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee has developed the foundations for establishing a network of opposition across Royal Mail Group to break the grip of the union apparatus, restore power to the shopfloor and link up the struggles of postal workers globally against the transnationals which dominate the postal and logistics sector.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact