

Victimised union rep at Britain's Royal Mail speaks on the mass frame-up of sub-postmasters by the Post Office

Our correspondent
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The World Socialist Web Site (WSWS) conducted the following interview with a victimised Communication Workers Union (CWU) rep at Royal Mail over the issues raised by the mass frame-up of sub-postmasters and postmistresses by the Post Office and the 20-year cover-up that followed.

A four-part drama series, "Mr Bates v the Post Office", aired on the ITV network this month, has brought the issue to the attention of millions.

As a WSWS article explained last week, the Post Office "scandal" implicates all the major political parties—Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrats—who were in power during different stages of the state orchestrated scapegoating of sub-postmasters for the faulty Horizon IT system installed by major transnational, Fujitsu.

The name of the victimised CWU rep—a member of the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee (PWRFC)—is being withheld to prevent further victimisation.

The PWRFC is spearheading a fight to expose the outcome of the CWU-Royal Mail Falconer Review into the mass victimisation of union reps and members during the year-long Royal Mail dispute. The terms of the Falconer Review—which delivered a travesty of justice—were agreed last year between the CWU, Royal Mail and state arbitration service ACAS.

WSWS: Do you see any parallels between the frame-up of sub-postmasters by the Post Office and the victimisation of union reps and CWU members by Royal Mail during the year-long dispute?

Victimised Rep (VR): Totally. It was absolutely frightening after watching the ITV drama and the previous BBC investigation to see the parallels with what we refer to as the "IB" [Investigation Branch] which conducts investigations for prosecutions by Royal Mail. The IB is officially there to investigate serious cases of theft and fraud which do occur. But it is the same reversal of due process, with guilty until proven innocent applied. The network of CCTV in the units can only be viewed and accessed by the IB. They will come in literally in the same way as in the ITV drama, en masse and march anyone off the premises suspected of an offence, treating them as utter criminals. I know of at least one case in which this happened to a delivery worker who was suspected of stealing parcels as they had not been tracked. But this was not their fault, they had scanned and delivered the parcels, but

the PDA [Postal Digital Assistants] hand-held device was faulty. They were accused of stealing 84 parcels and suspended. There was no apology when they were eventually found innocent after the ordeal they were put through.

The IB were deployed in the dispute on the picket lines, you could say it was weaponised against our strike. This came from the top, Simon Thompson [former CEO of Royal Mail] voicing his "concerns" about certain units, leading to a recommendation they actually hire private security. The IB did attend picket lines at units across the UK on strike days, and so did private security people as part of management surveillance and intimidation. They were very arrogant, checking the enforcement of the restrictions such as only six on a picket line and keeping them a certain distance from the workplace. They basically policed the picket line and reported back to management. I am not able to say for definite whether this was used to build the cases for unfair dismissals and suspensions. The CWU discouraged this approach.

I can say that Royal Mail is very resistant to requests by postal workers to see their files and anything communicated about them. They cite the GDPR [General Data Protection Regulation] as a pretext, but this is BS as the request is made by a worker about information on them personally and held by the company. This is also where similarities with the Post Office exist. As the ITV drama shows, the information on personal files and company documents requested by framed-up postmasters and their legal team was only granted in heavily redacted copies.

WSWS: As a victimised rep how do you feel hearing CWU leaders Dave Ward and Andy Furey declaring that Post Office execs must be held accountable for the persecution of sub-postmasters? As key architects of the Falconer Review, they presided over a sellout of hundreds of members and reps sacked and suspended during the Royal Mail dispute.

VR: The CWU have been played like puppets on a string by Royal Mail. As I've explained before, the principle was meant to be "no-one left behind"—that is, no end of the dispute without all those framed-up back in work. Royal Mail has also avoided possibly 400 cases at the Employment Tribunal (ET) in which they would have been bang to rights for mass victimisation and incurred huge costs. The CWU has accepted a COT3 [paperwork to terminate Employment Tribunal cases] in all the cases to forfeit *our* rights. Royal Mail has walked away scot-free while we had to

accept unjust charges in place of the original disciplinary measures. Yes, they are treated as “time expired” but not expunged from our records. That is why, according to the latest figure, only 38 sacked reps have returned and 82 accepted a financial settlement. But I know of examples where those who accepted a financial settlement have “dismissed” shown on their P45, which will go against them finding employment.

Who would trust Royal Mail and the CWU now or stand for a position of unit rep if they do not intend to toe the union-company line? Some of the reps have returned without resuming their elected positions and are being treated like lepers by management, and many units have been left without their elected representative. Royal Mail has got what it wanted thanks to Ward and Furey. The CWU has cancelled elections for unit reps in January indefinitely. This has nothing to do with “justice” and totally shows up the claim made by the CWU to have been vindicated by taking up the Falconer Review.

WSWS: The CWU is facing criticism from Royal Mail workers that the union did nothing to highlight and support the fight by sub-postmasters/mistresses against their mass legal frame-up. On the CWU Facebook, postal workers have asked what resolutions were passed at national conference or what financial support was provided to the fight taken up by the Justice For Subpostmasters Alliance.

VR: I have spoken to other CWU reps and they cannot recall it coming up at annual conferences or at a national or local level going back the last eight years. It is only through the ITV drama *Mr Bates v the Post Office* this has come to the forefront, and this is after 20 years; I was not aware of the full extent of all of this until now. The CWU did not take up the cause of the sub-postmasters. The little said to us by the CWU was they had their own representation, the Federation. This was a sectional and divisive approach.

WSWS: Andy Furey, CWU National Officer for Postmasters, has responded to criticism that the sub-postmasters/mistresses were failed by the National Federation of Sub Postmasters (NFSB), saying they are “in the pocket” of the Post Office. He says the answer for postmasters is to join the CWU, “a real trade union,” which puts their members first. What is your response?

VR: That is a throwaway line. The CWU will do nothing as the sub-postmasters are not deemed as employees by the Post Office. The majority of branches have been franchised out as opposed to the Crown Offices directly operated by the government. [Since the Post Office was separated from Royal Mail in 2012 for the latter’s privatisation, the number of Crown Post Offices has been slashed by two-thirds, with only 114 remaining operational as of 2022.] After more than eight days of national strike action by Crown Office postmasters and other staff in the supply chain during 2022 against a government pay freeze, the CWU pushed through a below-inflation pay deal of just 9 percent for 3 years [2021-24]. So much for representing postmasters and not the company.

At Royal Mail, I would say the CWU is in the company’s top pocket, where they can keep a close eye on them. The agreement to end our dispute was a complete and utter surrender and self-preservation document by Furey, Ward and the rest of the CWU postal executive against all their people.

The two examples of the pro-company agreement are the punishing and driving out of an established workforce and the two-tier system with new entrants on inferior terms. In relation to sickness, the attendance procedure is more punitive and sick entitlements and Ill Health Retirement (IHR) terms have been slashed. Ward and Furey were adamant they would never accept a two-tier workforce where people come in on 20 percent less pay, less terms, less everything. There are now contracts for new entrants where there is total flexibility. Sunday is treated as part of a normal week with no enhanced pay—normally around £18 per hour. They can be paid just £11.73 even on a Sunday. And new entrants are not on a 37-hour week but a 41-hour week as they don’t get paid for their meal break. This is a massive two-tier workforce. This is why they are attacking those on the old contract, to force them out.

The CWU said it was all about Quality of Service and keeping USO [six-day letter delivery service across the UK], maintaining the public service. But now they are agreeing to a reduction to a five-day letter delivery service, and I would not be surprised if they cut it to a four-day service. It all goes to fit an Amazon shift pattern model of four days on, four days off, as a 24/7 parcel delivery service. That is ultimately what the CWU and Royal Mail are heading towards.

WSWS: The WSWS article on the “Horizon scandal” indicted all the political parties—including Labour—in this industrial scale miscarriage of justice by the British legal system. What conclusions do you draw?

VR: Labour was the employer at the start of this abhorrent treatment of sub-postmasters. They washed their hands and classed it as an internal matter—they knew. You need to question whether this was all part of preparations for the privatisation and selloff [of] the Royal Mail as it was separated off from the Post Office by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government. All the parties were in on this. It is not enough for the former Post Office chief executive Paula Vennells to hand back her CBE [Commander of the British Empire award], all her bonuses should be paid back. It also means taking on Fujitsu, a massive multinational company which was completely at fault.

It has got to a stage in this country, who do you vote for? They are all the bloody same, and I include the Greens. Look at the bombing of Yemen. Starmer says he has agreed it—excuse me, who are you to agree! They claim to be in opposition but all work together behind the scenes. I would go on record to say this upcoming election will be the lowest turnout ever. The working class has no voice over what matters, Labour is just a Tory Party Mark II. We need a party which speaks for the working class.



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