

CWU-Royal Mail joint statements: reality versus corporate spin

Statement by the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee (UK)
24 January 2024

The Communication Workers Union (CWU) has hailed its latest joint statements with Royal Mail on Quality of Service and Seasonal Variation as a “fresh start” that places in the past the bitter issues at the heart of the 2022-23 dispute.

In his Letter to Branches (LTB) on January 15, Martin Walsh, new postal Deputy General Secretary of the CWU (elected with just 10 percent of eligible votes) asserted: “there has been a noticeable shift in how we are working together and changes in leadership on both sides has given us a chance for a fresh start.”

The CWU’s latest declarations of “mutual interest” with Royal Mail are packaged in a word salad of corporate jargon. Its purpose is to confuse members, while Ward and his sidekicks enforce their pro-company agreement against tens of thousands of workers across Royal Mail, including Parcelforce.

Walsh’s letter underscores the illegitimacy of last year’s UK-wide ballot on the “Business Recovery, Transformation and Growth Agreement”. The ballot went ahead based on cynical lies from CWU leaders Dave Ward and Andy Furey that they had secured a “very strong” joint statement with the company on “quality of service” that would address “all areas” of concern!

The joint statement was used to end the dispute and ram through an agreement for mass job cuts, brutal restructuring of terms and conditions and a two-tier workforce, aimed at converting Royal Mail into a 24/7 Amazon-style parcels network.

Walsh now has the gall to suggest that Martin Seidenberg, CEO of Royal Mail parent company International Distribution Services, represents a fresh approach at the top. This is someone the pro-Tory *Daily Telegraph* described last year as “a parcels man through and through” who would “oversee the death of letters”. But Ward and Walsh are eager as always to bend over and declare their eagerness for “joint problem solving” in “everybody’s interest”.

Walsh claims in his LTB that “250 planned table-top revisions” have been “ceased” in delivery offices. He fails to name a single one. The CWU does not oppose company revisions, only those imposed without their active collusion. During his podcast on January 19, Walsh let slip that while the postal executive opposed Royal Mail’s “unplanned” approach,

there would be a “small number of structural revisions”.

No-one should be fooled by this. The CWU has agreed an avalanche of further revisions. Walsh’s letter mentions continued “discussions with the business on finalising the activity linked to future revision activity in Upstream Areas and future revision activity & indoor preparation methods in Delivery.”

The January 15 joint statement on Quality of Service, signed by Walsh and Assistant Secretaries Mark Baulch and Davie Robertson, is a blatant defence of the company. Under “next steps” they speak about the need to “find the balance” between improving Quality of Service and the company’s “overall financial position.”

For postal workers, quality of service means ensuring a decent mail service to the public, which Royal Mail is intent on destroying. Whole parts of the UK have become “postal deserts” with mail reduced to a trickle, resulting in missed hospital appointments for the sick and elderly.

For the CWU and Royal Mail, “quality of service” means profitability for shareholders, achieved through “productivity” (exploitation of the workforce) while they collude with the government to end the six-day Universal Service Obligation (USO).

Far from being a fresh start, Walsh is shamelessly justifying Royal Mail’s actions. He told the CWU’s January 19 podcast that the company’s “financial position has been very difficult, and they would say they deployed those revisions by executive action to avoid administration and they landed badly in a lot of units.”

Walsh mentions “several outstanding issues”, listed as “Fleet”, “Supernumeraries”, “Sick Pay Calculations” and “outstanding issues from the Falconer Review”, which he claims, “we have the platform to speedily resolve”. No details are given because workers in each category are being shafted by the CWU.

While the joint statements are silent on the conditions facing postal workers, they provide granular detail about a panoply of union-company working groups. This makes clear their real purpose: the CWU’s total incorporation as an arm of management, enforcing the national agreement through ramped-up exploitation. They identify 24 “failing units” that will

receive “national support” from CWU-Royal Mail. This will serve as a model “to improve performance” at 1,200 delivery offices across Royal Mail Group.

Seasonal Variation heist

The joint statement on Seasonal Hours is another gift to Royal Mail. The introduction of seasonal flexibility, with the length of the working week varying throughout the year around mail traffic volumes, was a key plank of last year’s pro-company agreement that was bitterly opposed by workers. In addition to later start and finish times, it spelled the end of any work-life balance in line with the shift to a parcel-led delivery service.

The original agreement was for a High Season of 15 weeks on 39 hours, running from September 4 to December 17, 2023; a Mid-Season of 23 weeks on 37 hours (the normal working week) from December 18 to May 26, 2024; and a Low Season of 15 weeks on 35 hours from May 27 to September 8, 2024.

As a result of the agreement’s imposition, Royal Mail already owed delivery workers 30 hours due to longer hours between September and mid-December last year. But without any consultation—and with just one week’s notice—the CWU’s joint statement means delivery workers started this Monday on a Low Season of 35 hours for 5 weeks.

Walsh claimed workers would be repaid the extra leave accrued during the High Season. This equals two hours, but he hid the fact that Royal Mail has clawed back 10 hours of the 30 owed. It has cut paid meal relief for these five weeks from 40 to 30 minutes for any workday under 7 hours and 1 minute. As three days would be affected, workers will therefore only benefit 7.5 hours. They will be cheated of the remaining hours they are owed during the main Low Season in Summer. For every 2 hours owed they will only benefit from 1.5 hours because of the cut to paid meal relief. The CWU covered this up, with postal workers notified by management instead.

Walsh has stated workers will owe Royal Mail hours “for the first time” at the end of the Low Season scheduled for 15 weeks between the end of May and the beginning of September but has not confirmed by how much. The union and the company have not even confirmed when the High Season (now condensed to 5 weeks) will start in November. Everything is at the behest of Royal Mail while workers’ lives are turned upside down.

Postal workers speak out

George, a member of the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee (PWRFC) in Scotland said: “In our office, in the light of recent publicity regarding the state of the mail service—or lack thereof—a new area manager was appointed with the aim of clearing the backlog, employing agency staff and overtime for those that want it. If you don’t then you’re browbeaten into clearing your frame. The revisions introduced last year taking out two walks and delivery driver duty have not been reversed adding to our existing walks.

“The CWU generously gifted Royal Mail 25 minutes extra of our work a day pre-season pressure [High Season]. When the adjusted hours kick in this week, we have ten minutes a day taken off our break because we’re not working long enough to get a 40-minute break. All efforts to contact CWU head office have fallen on deaf ears.”

Ian, a PWRFC member in South Midlands, stated: “The issues affecting delivery workers are still being swept under the carpet by the leaders of the CWU. Massive, unachievable workloads, constant pressure to complete rounds, bullying tactics with threats of conduct or being moved off duties if the round is not completed, prioritising tracked parcels over letters, total disregard of the USO and continuing to follow the dispute mantra of ‘it’s our business to run’. Depending on the size of the unit, up to 20 walks have been absorbed into already overloaded duties displacing postal workers, many who have long years’ service and leaving them as reserves with no duty structure, forcing them to leave the business and being replaced by workers on lesser terms.

“The CWU claim a victory in stopping table-top revisions going ahead at a local level but offer no support in tackling what has already happened in most units. Morale is at an all-time low. Pride in the job gone. Race to the bottom CWU? It’s a full-on sprint.”

The Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee has called for an organised rebellion to defeat the imposition of the CWU-Royal Mail agreement. It is holding a Zoom meeting this Sunday at 7pm (register here). Send in reports from your workplace and join the fight to abolish the CWU’s unaccountable bureaucracy and bring decision-making to the shopfloor, placing workers’ interests before the profits of Royal Mail executives and shareholders.



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