

BBC Panorama's "Where is my post?": What we've got here is a failure to investigate

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Long before it aired, it was clear that the BBC's *Panorama* investigation into letter delivery failures by Royal Mail across the UK was going to be a cover-up. The surest sign of this was the involvement of Dave Ward, General Secretary of the Communication Workers Union (CWU).

Six days before it aired Monday night, CWU officials Ward and Martin Walsh posted a notice on the union's Facebook page announcing that *Panorama*'s "special episode" would "highlight the current state of play with regards to Royal Mail and the future of the postal service" by interviewing "a wide range of customers, managers and politicians".

They revealed, "the union has been engaged in the programme", promising it would "spark a major debate... and we will maximise our voice in that." A CWU press release announced that Ward would be available after the programme for media comment.

Among postal workers, suspicion was rife. Comments beneath the CWU's Facebook announcement were pointed: "Well it will be heavily edited, because ANY postie telling the truth would tear the CWU and Royal Mail apart... I'm not sure who is worse, [far-right commentator] Katie Hopkins, [Prime Minister] Rishi Sunak, Dave Ward or Royal Mail." Another postal worker added, "Always up for the fight behind a camera, different matter behind closed doors where they just cave in!!"

This was a reference to Ward's role in the bitter year-long strike at Royal Mail that was betrayed by the CWU. During months of secret talks with company executives, Ward co-authored a 35-page "Business Recovery, Growth and Transformation Agreement", cementing the destruction of terms and conditions for tens of thousands of postal workers.

Panorama's episode began with a promising question: "Royal Mail customers are demanding to know, 'Where's my post?'"

Reporter Zoe Conway cited chronic mail delays across Britain, including one quarter of first-class mail arriving late, and devastating, even life-threatening consequences for customers.

Panorama followed her to children old Harper and three-year-old Joshua, missed hospital appointments—Joshua for surgery to his throat—because mail notifications never arrived. Knocking on doors, Conway finds the problem is widespread. At Winsford delivery office, she encounters locals, including a cancer patient, arriving to ask for mail, including appointments for life-saving treatment, which they might otherwise not receive for weeks.

But *Panorama*'s opening question is sidestepped. The half-hour episode sees Conway evade any serious investigation of Royal Mail executives, the Conservative government, the Labour Party opposition, regulator Ofcom—and the CWU executive. The latter have colluded with Royal Mail to enforce a raft of "revisions" to work practices aimed at driving up workloads and crashing the six-day-a-week mail delivery guarantee known as the Universal Service Obligation (USO).

The sharpest proof of a cover-up is *Panorama*'s refusal to even mention the issues at stake in the year-long strike. This means excluding the voice of postal workers and blocks any examination of their struggle against the profit dictates of the company.

Instead, the USO's failure is presented solely as a consumer issue, to be resolved through moral appeals and an agreement between Royal Mail, the government and the CWU to reduce the USO while supposedly safeguarding the interests of "consumers". This is Ward's line during a softball interview with Conway.

Panorama's episode includes, preposterously, an interview with former CEO Rico Back who observes, "People do not get their letters and parcels sometimes, which means people are not very happy with Royal Mail." This is the same Rico Back appointed to oversee Royal Mail's shift to a parcel-led company. He creamed off millions during his two-year tenure, including a £6 million "golden hello" and annual salary package of £2.7 million.

Conway is a master of understatement. Her voiceover at the start announces, "Some posties say at times they are told

to prioritise parcels over letters”. You would never know that thousands of Royal Mail workers have already supplied evidence of company-wide prioritisation of tracked parcels over letters. Last year’s parliamentary inquiry was inundated with email submissions from postal workers.

Royal Mail workers have been scathing about *Panorama*’s “investigation”, with hundreds of angry and bemused comments on Facebook:

- “I thought Panorama was all about going undercover and getting to the truth... why talk to customers, they don’t know what’s happening... speak to us!!”

- “I thought it was rubbish and did not go anywhere near far enough”.

- “Load of old shite, wasn’t long enough and didn’t really get to the bottom of why we are failing almost daily. No mention of lapsing or our deliveries being too big in the first place. Doesn’t take much working out”.

- “Only touched the tip of the iceberg and what [a load] of crap that came out of both RM [Royal Mail] and the union.”

- “It was a program of lies and deception a coverup of the truth”.

Many workers ridiculed the limited investigative scope by the state broadcaster’s flagship current affairs programme. This included sending 51 first class letters to recipients to see how many arrived late (30 did). Conway later sent six letters with digital trackers inside to “find out where they are getting stuck” (spoiler: the delivery office).

Panorama’s interview with Back was galling, described by one postal worker as “the biggest kick in the nuts”. Likewise, Conway’s light-touch interview with Corporate Affairs Director Jenny Hall was ridiculed, with Hall denying any company policy to preference parcels over letters. Royal Mail needed to find “a financially sustainable way” to protect the USO, she argued. But shareholders and asset strippers like Blackrock Inc and Vesa Equity will not be deprived of their lucrative dividends and profits.

Labour MP Anneliese Dodds was portrayed as a crusader for truth over her prearranged visit to a delivery office in Oxford to investigate mail delays. She feigns shock that managers conspired to hide piles of undelivered letters. But Dodds, who served in the shadow Treasury team under Jeremy Corbyn’s shadow chancellor John McDonnell, and is now chair of the Labour Party, is never asked what Sir Keir Starmer’s pro-business party would do differently to the Tories. Her truthful answer would be “Nothing.”

Ward delivers the final sickening instalment in a balcony interview overlooking London’s financial district. He tells a gravely nodding Conway, “Royal Mail decided they wanted to go to a lower-cost employment model. They wanted to bring in new workers on lower terms and conditions, and

what they’ve created in the local sorting office is a situation where people can never complete their delivery in a lot of cases, and that’s led to lower morale.”

What a charlatan. These sweatshop conditions have been introduced in direct collusion with the CWU postal executive. It was Ward’s sellout national agreement that established a two-tier workforce with all new permanent hires on inferior pay, terms and conditions.

Ward finishes with a shameless call to ditch the six-day USO: “I think there needs to be some change to the universal service going forward. The union does recognise that. So we would probably consider looking at a five-day letter service, within a seven day parcel service.” This would be part of a “vision for growth” that would see postal workers delivering “new products and services”.

While Ward claimed a three-day USO would be “too much”, the CWU will not hesitate to roll over and impose it. Ward will once again threaten workers that failure to accept Royal Mail’s dictates (described inevitably as “modernisation”) will “push the company into bankruptcy”.

Conway concludes there is a “tension” between Royal Mail’s quest for profit and the public service ethos of its workforce. In fact, the drive for profit is *an absolute barrier* to workers’ most basic interests. A fight must be initiated to break free of the pro-company CWU by building rank-and-file committees, challenging the profit dictates of the corporate oligarchy. Royal Mail, BT and the major energy and transport companies must be expropriated and placed under the democratic control of the working class.



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