

CWU tells Parcelforce workers they must accept company's "bottom line" and compete with gig-economy

Tony Robson and Daniel O'Flynn
14 May 2024

The Communication Workers Union (CWU) held a *CWU Live* YouTube show last Thursday on Parcelforce, the parcel delivery arm of Royal Mail that employs around 6,500 workers across 54 depots in the UK.

The CWU billed the event as "PARCELFORCE FENDING OFF THE GIG ECONOMY. READY TO FIGHT?!" promising a "Parcelforce Special: We answer your questions!".

The "Q&A" session was hosted by CWU Head of Communications Chris Webb with National Officer Davie Robertson, but this was the last thing on offer. Questions from Parcelforce workers were vetted in advance, with a conspicuous absence of any citing backbreaking workloads, injuries, or management bullying, all of which are rife at the parcel carrier.

Instead, Robertson comments were framed entirely from the standpoint of accepting the "company's bottom line" and "returning Parcelforce to profitability."

The CWU is losing its grip and Robertson began the show defensively, stating: "I know there can be some frustration at times with what [Parcelforce members] perceive as a lack of feedback".

This is beyond an understatement. Feedback by Parcelforce members in the online chat—ignored by Webb and Robertson—included:

- "So much anger at the union now, many members think the union capitulated to Royal Mail's gig economy agenda."

- "Disgrace CWU you've lost everything we all fought for years."

- "The union recommending a deal which puts new members on inferior conditions is a disgrace."

Parcelforce drivers' anger toward last year's sellout national agreement is shared by workers across Royal Mail. Robertson trotted out threadbare claims by the union that its surrender document had seen off the gig economy at Parcelforce, "ending Uberisation".

Such claims are lies. The Business Recovery, Transformation and Growth agreement (BRTG) merely capped the percentage of owner-drivers at 25 percent (in line with earlier agreements). But the CWU also committed to "alternative solutions" to boost productivity for those directly employed by Parcelforce.

Robertson waxed lyrical about his cosy relations with Rob Fowler, the new managing director at Parcelforce, claiming the "Aaron Barnes' regime" had ended. But he referred to both on first-name terms, adding that "Rob" has had time to reflect on the business and would be picking up on the programme of work agreed with "Aaron."

In fact, Robertson worked closely with the "Barnes regime" to bulldoze through a joint-statement in May last year to "deploy revisions at pace" through cost-cutting and increased workloads. The May 2023 joint-statement approved Appendix 3 of the BRTG agreement, despite 100,000+ Royal Mail and Parcelforce workers not having been balloted on it.

Robertson insisted the CWU's main task was to show Royal Mail a way "to bridge that cost gap". He vented against workers for opposing this race-to-the-bottom against companies like DPD: "While we can moan and wail that it is all unfair, it's gig economy and it's this and that, the company's going to be looking at the bottom line saying 'Yeh but it's cheaper.'"

The CWU has helped further entrench the gig

economy through the Alternative Reward Mechanism (ARM) at Parcelforce. Robertson has promoted this to the hilt, explaining it was a “test bed” for workers across Royal Mail. The ARM is a payment per parcel model for delivery drivers directly employed by Parcelforce whereby they receive £1.30 per parcel after meeting their set targets. This was described by Robertson as an incentive to earn a “wee bit more on top” after the CWU recommended the below inflation three year pay deal of just 10 percent as part of the BRTG agreement, slashing wages in real terms.

Robertson’s message amounted to a demand that workers knuckle down and compete against DPD for improved market share. While Parcelforce moved 75 million items per year, he explained, DPD moved 260 million items per year with a far larger network of depots that operate on a gig economy employment model. He declared that DPD’s “commercial benefits would have to be overcome in other ways” offering an open-ended commitment to cut costs and ramp up exploitation.

A central aim of last year’s national agreement, outlined in section 5 of the BRTG, was to create a single large parcel network across Parcelforce and Royal Mail delivery units. Robertson conceded that various experiments trialled by the CWU’s Joint Working Group with Royal Mail had not yet proved viable. Increased traffic of larger parcels into delivery offices was not being supported by “reciprocal” transfer to Parcelforce. This has placed further impossible pressure on the Universal Service Obligation (USO) with Royal Mail delivery workers forced to deal with heavier loads and more parcels prioritised over letters.

At the same time, Parcelforce workers have not experienced any decline in their work volumes. The workforce has been downsized, with drivers facing speed-ups, expanded routes and increased volumes. Parcelforce drivers also face constant surveillance and harassment from managers via their hand-held devices, with disciplinary measures for failing to complete punishing duties.

Robertson made clear the union will renew efforts toward a single parcel network to “avoid going up the same country path three or four times a day”. He used Royal Mail’s corporate buzzwords about “economies of scale” and “cost effectiveness” which will mean a

reduction in routes and job losses.

Speaking of “headcount reduction”, Robertson gloated this had been achieved at the expense of agency workers and owner-drivers, stating insincerely: “I know that might not please everyone.”

The CWU’s disdain for owner-drivers, who have no job security or basic employment rights sums up the corrupt, pro-company union bureaucracy: unity with Royal Mail shareholders and divide and rule for the workers. The CWU refuses to challenge the bogus definition of owner-drivers as “self-employed”, denying them any employment rights even though their hours and delivery routes are determined strictly by Parcelforce. Meanwhile they must provide their own vehicles, fuel and vehicle and health insurance, and struggle to earn even the minimum wage based on payment per parcel rather than an hourly rate. A group of owner drivers has taken out a legal challenge against Royal Mail, but the CWU has maintained a deafening silence on the issue, eager to conceal its complicity in this gig economy regime.

The Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee encourages Parcelforce workers to get in touch and help organise a unified fightback to defeat the CWU’s collusion with Royal Mail and the brutal restructuring being enforced across Royal Mail to slash jobs and dismantle the USO.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)