

Royal Mail delivery worker slams latest revisions: “It’s absolutely killing people”

Our reporter
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A Royal Mail delivery worker from Yorkshire, England spoke with the World Socialist Web Site about the impact of new revisions to delivery routes, impossible workloads, and further decimation of the mail service. His identity is being withheld to protect against victimisation.

The brutal conditions described flow from last year’s sellout national agreement between Royal Mail and the Communication Workers Union (CWU) postal executive, aimed at transforming the company into an Amazon-style parcel business with gig-economy conditions to match.

For months, the CWU has been locked in closed-door talks with Daniel Kretinsky’s EP Group and Labour MPs over the company’s takeover plans—talks which CWU officials Dave Ward and Martin Walsh have described as “constructive”.

On July 21, The Telegraph reported that “Kretinsky’s swoop for the postal service is just one step in a far larger strategy”, using his company’s Europe-wide retail and logistics assets to create “the Amazon of Europe”.

The latest round of revisions is a downpayment on the ruthless corporate offensive planned by EP Group and their partners in the Labour government. Meanwhile, CWU officials like Ward (annual salary £144,635) are planning to cement their partnership with Kretinsky at the direct expense of postal workers.

This interview is part of a discussion being led by the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee on how to fight back. Please send us your feedback using the form below.

Can you explain changes to working hours and how that is affecting delivery staff?

The agreement brought in seasonal work hours. Within the last month, it’s been about half-an-hour later start, and then half-an-hour later finish. But it varies from day to day. There’s not that much difference in start and finish times, but for people who have kids it’s challenging, and it’s what the majority of people are there for anyway, the earlier finishing times.

But it’s not so much the start times and the finish times in the last month, but the pressure and workload.

Is that workload and pressure coming from the revisions to delivery routes?

Yes, it’s completely changed. They’ve taken parcels that are above say shoebox size off us but they’ve added quite a lot,

what seems like an extra 30 percent, onto our duties. It seems like an extra third of the frame [shelves where the mail is allocated for each delivery round], which would probably be an extra three or four miles, depending which route you’re on.

How were the routes revised?

I think it’s done through software, AI-type stuff. What’s happened this time, so I’ve heard off quite a lot of people, is that the person whose job it was to add the extra routes to everybody’s rounds, he’s not put in certain information that you need to add to make the routes as manageable as they can be.

For example, there’s something we call leapfrogging: we normally go out in twos, unless you’re on a rural route. One person would start their loop and then walk a certain distance, and the van would be waiting for them at the end. So that each person’s moving the van to the end of the next person’s loop. So that’s one thing that he’d not put in the system. And then criss-crossing over the road, rather than walking up and back down. He’s not included all this information, and he’s let the software do it any-old-how.

All the routes are completely scrambled. Some of it seems almost random and there’s a lot of what we call “dead walking”—so you’re walking back from the end of your loop and not delivering letters on the way. And bits that would have been downhill on the rounds before, are up-hill now. And so many bits don’t make any sense, that are not in a loop getting back to the van but end up somewhere miles away. There’s no clear walkers’ and drivers’ loops. It’s really confusing.

What’s been the impact on customers?

Mail is almost considered on the same level as leaflets. It can go out whenever, it doesn’t really matter, as long as tracked parcels get delivered then it’s alright in their eyes.

We’re getting customers constantly asking, “Are you on strike again?” and “Where’s my mail?”, who have got NHS letters. One old woman told me she had been waiting for a week. It’s important stuff that people need sometimes.

What about the impacts for delivery staff of additional parcel and mail loads?

A few days ago, I sent my dad a photo of the sack cart. My first loop on the round was massive, with about five days’ worth of mail. The bags were packed with mail and parcels, and

there were two large bundles I couldn't physically carry, so I left them in the van. That loop was going up a steep road, really long and unrelentingly steep. And it was a red-hot day, 25 degrees. It was just crazy. It's demoralising as well.

The new 40-minute loops are twice as long as the old loops. So you've got more parcels to carry, and they're twice as long. They'll have calculated this loop to an average day, so when it comes to a busy day, you've got a week's worth of mail to deliver, which happens pretty regularly. The loop I'm telling you about took almost an hour-and-a-half. It's insane. It's exhausting, because you're barely stopping from one loop to the next. And the bags are so much heavier.

The first loop might be do-able, but by the end of the day, you're doing eight loops a day, you're a wreck. As soon as I get home, I just sit and stare into space. I can't even think straight.

It might be more efficient from their point of view, but it's absolutely killing people. It's well more gruelling than before—and before it was already horrible. Everyone's in the same boat. Everyone's hating it, even people who were always positive about the company are hating it now.

If they've increased your load of parcels and widened the routes, are they expecting you to complete within your allocated duty times?

There's no consequences if you don't, in terms of them saying "you have to do it". But they do say they want you to do it within the time, and that they're trying to "iron out a few creases" and then it should be "do-able" in the time. But the thing that does happen is that you end up with a backlog every day if you don't get the duties done. For most it's just impossible. It's completely ludicrous in some cases to even get most of it done.

The bundles in these loops can be massive, back-breaking. Even though you can just take a certain amount out, and not complete the round, it just means you have to deal with double mail the next day. It's more stressful and you get customers complaining. It always comes back on you as a postie to have to deal with. And you always wonder, if something doesn't get delivered or taken out, and they want someone to blame, it's going to be us.

From what you're describing it's structured to fail. What do delivery workers think is the management strategy behind this?

Quite a lot of people think it's deliberate, to drive people out on contracts that are more expensive and replace them with new staff on the new contracts [agreed by the CWU] that are much worse. They don't get paid for breaks, they don't get money for delivering leaflets and door-to-doors. Someone said it's about £100 less a week if you factor in all the payments not included. So they're saving a lot of money on the new contracts.

They are driving people to quit. In the last year, there's been about 10-15 people that have quit from our office. Last week,

two people quit on the same day, people who had been there 25-30 years. It seems like it would be impossible to accidentally mess it up so badly. I can't imagine how you could do that by accident.

We've received messages from delivery offices saying there should be a walkout. And a lot of anger toward the CWU, and toward reps who are seen as either useless or complicit. What is the feeling at your office?

When the strikes happened, they tried to act like they were on our side and would back down at nothing. But they've taken a back seat now and are silent really. One minute they were going to fight it all the way. The next minute they were advising us to accept this deal which was more-or-less the same as the original.

Neither of the union guys at the office have really kicked off at all. When me or anyone else at the office has asked them what they think we should do about the revisions, they're like "maybe some of these rounds will be do-able". These guys, they get an easy ride, and they have the manager's ear, don't they? And the managers want their ear as well.

As we've seen on the union WhatsApp group, the majority have completely lost faith in them to fight our corner. It seems to have been like that since after the strikes. A lot of people in the office are in the union just as a little bit of insurance, in case they have some kind of dispute with the managers. I remember when I started a few years ago, everyone was like "you have to join the union", and they had a lot of faith in them.

There were a few people in our chatgroup that agreed there should be a walkout against the latest revisions, but the union rep nipped it in the bud pretty quickly. Some people still trust him, and also people don't really know how to go about organising something like that. And people are scared about losing their jobs, and they don't see it as a potential way to fix it. But I was saying to my dad a few weeks ago when this all started, that people are really mad about it. And so many people are talking about quitting and saying they're looking for a new job. And a lot of people are refusing to do overtime. So, it is a good time to talk to people and give them information. People need to know that there could be an alternative.



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