

Oppose the USO pilots imposed by CWU and Royal Mail!

Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee
19 January 2025

Collective opposition must be organised against the bureaucratic imposition of the “USO reform” pilots by the Communication Workers Union (CWU) hierarchy and Royal Mail management at 37 delivery offices across the UK.

The pilot delivery offices are a testing ground for mass job destruction, increased workloads and the gutting of the mail service to be rolled out across 1,200 delivery offices nationally.

We appeal to our brothers and sisters at the 37 targeted delivery offices and all other postal workers: “Stand together! Hands off our jobs, conditions and the mail service!”

Dress rehearsal for massive attacks

The USO pilots, starting in February, were sprung on us with barely any notice. Behind our backs, Martin Walsh, CWU deputy general secretary, signed a “USO Reform Pilot Terms of Reference” in December with Royal Mail Chief Operating Officer Alastair Cochrane. They also signed an “Enablers Letter” headlined: “Working together to create the right platform to introduce USO Reform”.

Both documents spell out the CWU Postal Executive’s full agreement with company plans, backed by Ofcom and the Starmer Labour government, to “reform” [i.e., dismantle] the USO (Universal Service Obligation). This includes identifying workers deemed “surplus” to requirements through the imposition of Royal Mail’s “Optimised Delivery Model”.

Ward has proclaimed the CWU’s commitment to “no compulsory redundancies”, but the Enablers letter states this only applies until the end of the pilot scheme in June! A jobs massacre will follow, as Kretinsky implements the EP Group’s strategy for a parcel-led business to compete with Amazon, Evri and UPS.

Based on the envisaged “success” of the pilot scheme, Royal Mail and the CWU state they will “conclude a National Agreement” on “full USO deployment, including resolution of any potential surplus from deploying USO change”. The USO pilots are a dress rehearsal for attacks on all postal workers and must be fought on this basis.

Lies and subterfuge

Ward and Walsh’s Big Lie is that Royal Mail is “reforming” the USO, not dismantling it. But the “Optimised Delivery Model” announced last April set out company plans to slash delivery of Second Class and all letters other than First Class to alternate weekdays to achieve £300 million cost savings with the loss of 7,000 jobs.

The pilot scheme co-authored by the CWU will enact this slash and burn agenda, ahead of Ofcom’s inevitable seal of approval due in the Summer. Ofcom has already declared the USO is “financially unsustainable”.

CWU officials agree with regulator Ofcom that Royal Mail’s billionaire investors should not be “burdened” with a universal six-day mail service to the public.

Walsh’s claim that the USO pilots are about “Quality of Service” is laughable. The pilot terms of reference states the company must merely match the rock-bottom quality performance for 2023-4 when it failed (yet again) to meet its statutory duties to the public.

While the mail service is downgraded, the new delivery model gives parcels the same status as First-Class letters six days a week. Workloads will go through the roof.

The USO pilot agreement pays lip service to ensuring that “individual workload and all tasks are achievable and fair” and that “duty design changes ensure fatigue is taken account of”, but such claims are worthless.

Tony Bouch, CWU Outdoor Secretary, has stated the USO changes will mean increased workloads and up to five hours out on delivery. We have already reached that point as we haul around oversized and heavier parcels. The “optimised model” would push us towards six hours

If this is what is being said publicly, what more did Ward and Kretinsky agree in their months of closed-door talks?

We have already received information from union reps that under the pilot we would no longer have our own duties, and that two delivery workers would be expected to complete the workload of three. This is in line with the use of AI and other forms of automation in Canada and the US to impose gig economy conditions.

The CWU has tried to sugar-coat the USO pilots by touting their agreement with Royal Mail to uplift 11,000 part-timers employed prior to December 2022 to full-time on legacy terms. But Walsh admitted on January 16 that around 11,000 workers on variation contracts had already been working full-time for years, (as far back as 2016 in some cases) while being denied a permanent contract. Even now, the CWU has only agreed to their transfer on a piecemeal basis, with the first group of 8,529 workers offered a permanent job of 37 hours. The CWU's smoke and mirrors has misled thousands of part-time workers to believe they would be uplifted.

Permanent employment must be a right available to all workers, not used as a shabby cover for union collusion with management to gut the USO and slash thousands of jobs!

Undemocratic stitch-up

After the Business Recovery, Transformation and Growth Agreement they rammed through in July 2023, CWU officials know the last thing members will accept is another "transformation agenda". That is why the pilots are being brought in over our heads.

The CWU's surrender document in 2023 crossed every red line we defended through 18 days of strike action. It ushered in seasonal work rosters, a two-tier workforce, the slashing of sick pay, and the use of PDAs to monitor and discipline frontline staff to drive up workloads.

The USO pilots are being introduced without even a vote by the staff who will be impacted. The CWU's Enablers Letter declares that "there will be joint briefing of all the affected Mail Centres and Delivery Offices in January 2025 to present the proposed changes and launch the planned pilot activity".

These will be joint meetings of management and union reps. The briefing sessions are aimed at stifling and suppressing the views of postal workers. They have no democratic legitimacy.

Postal workers must put a stop to these plans! Emergency meetings should be convened at all affected sites to countermand the CWU hierarchy, reject participation in the pilot schemes, and outline key demands for the protection of jobs, terms and conditions, and the defence of the USO. An appeal for support should be made to workers across Royal Mail, including at Parcelforce and GLS, and to workers at Amazon, UPS and Evri to oppose the race-to-the-bottom.

The need for rank-and-file committees

CWU Divisional Reps have been called in to roll-out the

USO pilots so that Ward and Walsh can peddle their claim that the scheme has the consent of members. But these local officials have done nothing to address our longstanding grievances over management harassment, illegal prioritisation of parcels over letters, and working past our contracted hours to complete deliveries. The divisional reps, on full-time paid release, are doing Royal Mail's dirty work. They proposed 34 of the 37 delivery offices on the company hit list for the USO pilots.

An example is Tam Dewar, CWU Divisional Rep overseeing the pilot at Cumbernauld delivery office in Scotland. The last time he attended the workplace was to justify cutting two duties and increasing workloads. His response to members' opposition was to say they had to "get real" as Royal Mail was a privatised company, which must look after its shareholders.

The USO pilot scheme shows how fully the CWU has been integrated with management. The pilot terms of reference states: "A National Steering Group, National Functional working groups for Delivery, Processing, Local Distribution, MPUS, Collection and Regional Joint Working Group have been agreed. These groups will align on key areas to ensure the pilots are successful in meeting the objectives of USO reform."

These objectives include meeting "commercial targets" and creating a "financially sustainable USO". This is a foretaste of the CWU's 12-page Framework Agreement endorsing Daniel Kretinsky's £3.5 billion takeover of Royal Mail, hailed by Dave Ward as "a fresh start".

Only through organising a rank-and-file rebellion can a genuine fight be waged. We need to establish lines of communication across all workplaces to link our struggles and assert our demands against the profit gouging by Kretinsky and his private equity vultures and asset strippers.

To defeat the alliance of Kretinsky, the CWU and the Starmer government we need to turn to our allies in the postal and logistics sector across Europe, Canada, and the US, who are facing the same coordinated attack by corporate and state-owned carriers using AI and other forms of automation to slash jobs and boost profits. Automation should be used to improve working conditions not to line the pockets of billionaire investors.

Is the pilot scheme being operated at your workplace? Get in touch to organise a fightback. We appeal to all Royal Mail workers to help distribute this statement.



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