

CWU update on USO pilots: defending profits to sacrifice workers' jobs, conditions and the mail service

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A Communication Workers Union (CWU) Letter to Branches (LTB) titled “USO Update on Pilot Sites” is the latest self-serving justification by CWU top officials for trialling Royal Mail’s plans to overhaul the mail service, implement mass job cuts, and hike up workloads.

Signed by CWU Deputy General Secretary (postal) Martin Walsh and Assistant Secretaries Davie Robertson and Tony Bouch, the letter purports “to bring Branches and members up to date” on the first pilot sites nationally and “wider USO reform.”

The six-page letter (dated April 15) amplifies the CWU’s pro-company messaging on the dismantling of the Universal Service Obligation (USO). It defends Ofcom’s deregulation of the postal service, repeating the mantra of billionaire Daniel Kretinsky and his EP Group that the USO is “financially unsustainable”.

Walsh and his sidekicks explain, “Royal Mail and the CWU agreed four overarching principles” on which the success of the pilots will be based. These “principles” include making sure the workforce meets “commercial targets” and “Ofcom targets” and making sure the Optimised Delivery Model (ODM) “achieves a 90% quality of service target for first class letters”.

The CWU’s other criteria for judging the trials “a success”, include ensuring “workload is fair, manageable and achievable”, reducing fatigue, improving attendance patterns with more Saturdays off, and improving “morale and confidence in the workplace”. But these are a smokescreen behind which the CWU has agreed to enforce Kretinsky’s dictates.

The ODM will cut the number of routes, and increase call rates by up to a third, with longer time spent on delivery stretching over 5 hours. Extra Saturdays off

are to facilitate longer weekday hours and a rotation between “core” and “combined routes” to remove delivery workers from any fixed duty.

The LTB is a continuation of the CWU’s damage limitation exercise in the face of mounting criticism from postal workers over the “USO Reform Pilot Terms of Reference” signed by Walsh in December. The CWU also signed an “Enablers Letter” with Royal Mail: “Working together to create the right platform to introduce USO Reform”.

Walsh’s USO pilot update was promised by him on March 22, as part of a public attack against the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) and Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee (PWRFC). WSWS articles exposing the USO pilots and calling on postal workers to organise resistance, were widely read.

A WSWS article on March 18, exposed the CWU’s clampdown on opposition to the pilots at Cumbernauld in Scotland, where a workplace meeting in January heard delivery workers’ concerns about the pilots being “unworkable”. But a motion to oppose the pilots to defend postal workers’ jobs and conditions, was blocked by the workplace rep, one week before Cumbernauld was co-opted into the trial.

Walsh was unable to refute a single word reported by WSWS, but he announced a visit to Cumbernauld delivery office as proof of “engagement” with members. He promised, “Following my attendance in Cumbernauld we will release a further communication including interviews with members within the unit. The Truth will prevail.”

While his latest LTB is ostensibly an update on “progress”, it is clear the CWU’s pro-company reforms are encountering a rocky reception, with just 6 of the 37

pilot sites underway. Its presentation of “progress” at Newton Mearns, Cumbernauld, Girvan, Ballymena, Ayr, and Antrim is an airbrushed account, side-by-side vague admissions that “some all-mail core routes are not clearing” and of “the need to find solutions to fatigue”.

Tellingly, the CWU’s “update” includes no testimonials from rank-and-file workers at any of the pilot sites.

The LTB confirms the central contention of WSWs: that the CWU hierarchy is enforcing the USO’s dismantling, in partnership with Kretinsky, Ofcom and the Starmer government. They are operating as an industrial police force for management.

This involves not only ending six-day delivery of second-class letters, but reductions in quality-of-service targets for both, with First Class next day delivery targets reduced from 93 percent to 90 percent.

The CWU’s LTB offers open endorsement for Ofcom’s attack on the USO, once again crying poor on behalf of EP Group: “in its current form the USO imposes substantial unnecessary costs on Royal Mail because it requires provision of a service which is greater than generally required by postal users.”

This is a massive slap in the face of postal workers and the general public.

Walsh & Co are fooling nobody with their throwaway line in the LTB: “We have not agreed as yet to full USO reform.” Especially as their faux disclaimer is followed up with threats that unless the ODM is accepted, the alternative is a reduction of the USO to 3 to 4 days.

There is no end to the CWU’s collusion. The goal posts are simply moved further back, with postal workers carrying the burden of longer hours, backbreaking workloads, and a brutal regime of performance management. The LTB states, “Where there are potential job reductions these will be resolved through a combination of not filling vacancies ahead of deployment and voluntary redundancies.”

This is an open admission that the CWU-Royal Mail ODM means further mass job destruction, deepening a regime of workplace revisions that has forced thousands to quit. Walsh stated callously last November that “only” 1,000 job losses would result from USO reform as 6,000 would be through “natural wastage.” This is in addition to slashing the workforce

by 10,000 in 2023/4.

The USO pilots are mired in crisis, with the start date at most of the 37 trial offices pushed back to May. There is no support for the dismantling of the USO among postal workers or the public, and there is outright disgust over yet another vital service being handed over exclusively to billionaire oligarchs and asset-strippers.

This sentiment must be transformed into active opposition through the development of a rank-and-file network uniting postal workers across delivery offices, mail centres and Parcel Force. Such committees must champion workers’ interests, not corporate profit, breaking the grip of the CWU bureaucracy.

We encourage postal workers to attend this Sunday’s online meeting of the PWRFC on April 27 at 7 p.m. The meeting will expose the attacks on the USO at pilot and non-pilot offices and discuss a fighting strategy to oppose Kretinsky’s war plans against the mail service. It will hear from postal workers internationally engaged in the fight against the same play book employed by the corporate oligarchy.

Register now and make plans to attend.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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