

The CWU's whitewash of Royal Mail USO pilots cannot conceal a workplace disaster

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The June 26 seven-page Communication Workers Union (CWU) bulletin presented as a “full written update” on the Universal Service Obligation (USO) reform pilots is a whitewash. But it fails in its aim of concealing a workplace disaster engulfing Royal Mail’s workforce.

The pilot scheme was hatched in December by CWU Deputy General Secretary Postal Martin Walsh and Royal Mail executives behind postal workers’ backs. CWU HQ has resisted providing a full account since 33 of 37 targeted delivery offices were rolled out from February.

Far from a modest “reform,” the pilots are the first tranche of the Optimised Delivery Model (ODM) jointly devised by Royal Mail, regulator Ofcom, and CWU leaders. This aims to slash £300 million across 1,200 delivery offices—profits destined for billionaire Daniel K?etínský’s EP Group, now sole owner of Royal Mail.

The ODM downgrades public service to alternate weekday letter delivery (except first-class), transforms Royal Mail into a parcel carrier, and entrenches gig-economy style working flexibility: abolishing fixed duties, inflating call rates by 30 percent and extending delivery spans to over five hours to facilitate mass job losses.

This gives the lie to the CWU’s official position of “testing assumptions” and that the pilots must meet four tests of success before the ODM is fully deployed across Royal Mail. These are restated in the bulletin:

- Achieve Ofcom Quality of Service (QoS) and all commercial targets.
- Ensure fair, manageable, and achievable workload is in place.
- Provide opportunities to improve attendance patterns with fewer Saturdays at work.
- Improve confidence and morale within the workplace.

Even within the airbrushed account drawn up with CWU reps and vetted by CWU National Officer Tony Bouch, a devastating picture emerges.

Achieving Quality or collapsing the service?

The bulletin plays a shell game, highlighting isolated “positive” signs in a bid to downplay systemic failure. Quality of Service is

crumbling under longer delivery spans and impossible workloads.

In Melton Mowbray, delivery performance dropped to 83.35 percent—a decline compared to pre-pilot levels. In Scotland, out of the four offices to go live in March/April—Newton Mearns, Cumbernauld, Girvan and Ayr—only Newton Mearns “is reported to be meeting Quality of Service and USO targets.”

Under the “Pilot Terms of Reference” drawn up between Walsh and Royal Mail, this meant the pilots only had to maintain current QoS performance—the rock bottom benchmark of 2023-4—meaning the failure to deliver a quarter of first-class letters on time (part of three years of consecutive breaches.)

In Scunthorpe, second-class mail is not meeting targets. Mount Pleasant W1 in London has already dropped entire delivery areas due to logistical problems.

The emergency fixes cited—reinstated duties, use of agency staff, trials of night shifts—are triage measures to prevent pilots from collapsing, not “adjustments.” The model is a fraud: that three delivery workers can do the job of four with fewer full mail delivery days based on the same traffic volumes. Postal workers are having to deliver two to three days’ worth of mail on some days.

What “fixes” management has reluctantly applied will not be adopted in the full deployment of ODM at the 97 percent of delivery offices nationally currently outside the trials.

Fair workloads or postal workers driven to exhaustion?

Fatigue is the recurring theme in the bulletin, but it is skated over. It’s noted across the UK: in Ballymena (Northern Ireland), Cumbernauld (Scotland), and in England—Bulwell, Brinklow (Midlands), Winchester, Romsey, and Salisbury (South Central). In Bulwell, delivery spans exceed five hours, “masked by overtime and assistance on duties.”

The new “combined” and “core” routes are based on increasing call rates from 58 to 78 percent, the bulletin states core routes have increased to 85 percent (Melton Mowbray) and 90 percent (Bulwell).

CWU officials paint these issues as minor “teething problems” rather than an integral part of the ODM designed to intensify exploitation. CWU HQ says nothing about the “fatigue/ergonomic

study” at Cumbernauld meaning delivery staff wearing heart monitors as they are pushed to the limits of exhaustion. Demands for weighing bags and graduating the workloads as per procedure to prevent fatigue are ignored.

Attendance pattern “improvements” for whose benefit?

The ODM’s most-touted selling point by the CWU is “fewer Saturdays”. Members “welcome” more Saturdays off, we’re told. The real trade-off is buried: longer shifts, reduced daily flexibility, heavier workloads, and declining work-life balance.

What is being rolled out is an attendance model geared toward managerial control and moulded exclusively around business interests: “Nine-day fortnights,” “2/5” and “2/6” Saturdays off, and “Option G” are experimental frameworks to shift labour costs without adding resource. The CWU glosses over the unravelling of Sunday duties, hidden increases in weekday hours, and erosion of health and safety.

Improved morale or postal workers put through the grinder?

The claim that the pilots can “improve morale and confidence” is among the most insulting. The bulletin acknowledges “struggles on several fronts,” “frustrations,” “indoor sort bottlenecks,” “confusion with varying daily workloads,” and surging “traffic volumes.”

In Louth, turnover has spiked. In Brinklow, delays in the indoor operation mean that deliveries are starting later.

CWU reps are said to be “working hard” for “frontline staff”, but they’ve been assigned by Walsh to dress up a disaster as a work in progress. The Post Implementation Review (PIR) process is pitched as a serious evaluation, but its function is to buy time, wear workers down, and prepare complete USO restructuring

burden”—echoing the corporate oligarchy. Everything not serving profit—jobs, worker rights, public service—is marked for destruction.

The CWU is imposing management’s diktats via pilots, PIRs, and “feedback surveys.” The “engagement” exercise with management is to disrupt and wear down opposition to remake the workforce into a cheap, parcel-focused, disposable labour pool.

Rank-and-file resistance, not pro-company engagement

Postal workers called out the CWU bulletin on Facebook:

- “I can tell you now my office is a shambles. Never in 38 years have I seen such a ridiculous way of working!!!! Work is stacked up—frames with letters in them for days!!!! Whoever came up with this needs to be sacked!!!! And as for our union backing this—you’re a disgrace!!!!”

- “If the trials show that the way of working is driving the staff to the point of exhaustion, then surely that is enough evidence for CWU reps and Royal Mail decision makers that the trial has failed... end of!!”

- “The USO change is the single biggest disaster ever to be imposed on delivery staff.”

On Sunday, Walsh and CWU General Secretary Dave Ward announced a “negotiators’ agreement” with EP Group following further closed-door talks, and have now stated that the CWU Postal Executive will vote on this on Thursday morning before details are released to members that afternoon.

The wrecking operation needs to be stopped, the pilots halted and USO “reform” opposed. The mail service will not survive this vandalism, and postal workers cannot endure these sweatshop conditions.

The Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee (PWRFC) has sought to mobilise opposition by laying the foundations for a network of resistance led from the shopfloor—*independent, democratic and accountable to postal workers*. We encourage those at the pilot offices to write in with their accounts to expose the official cover-up, as well as delivery workers who have raised how their units are being softened up for the ODM.

CWU: K?etínský’s industrial enforcers

The CWU states that regardless of Ofcom’s decision, “it is for Royal Mail and the CWU to agree how and when any USO reform is deployed.” Yet Ofcom’s 198-page January report endorsed ODM ahead of its official July announcement. Walsh has tried to blackmail postal workers that the ODM must be accepted regardless, citing the regulator’s impending confirmation.

ODM’s rollout hinges on the collusion of the CWU bureaucracy with K?etínský’s EP Group and the Labour government that greenlit the takeover. CWU leaders are not reluctantly implementing the ODM—they helped shape it as part of their “fresh start” with K?etínský. The USO is smeared as an “unfair



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