

CWU rams through pro-company agreements at Royal Mail off historic low voter turnout

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The Communication Workers Union (CWU) announced Wednesday that its members had “overwhelmingly endorsed” two agreements, on pay and “rebuilding Royal Mail”, with billionaire Daniel Kretinsky’s EP Group.

CWU officials reported a 79.5 percent Yes vote, and a 20.5 percent No vote, with Dave Ward and his Deputy Martin Walsh declaring the ballot “an emphatic endorsement of the union’s position and the agreements we have reached.”

Nothing could be further from the truth. Just 43.5 percent of members submitted a ballot return—a vote of no-confidence in the entire CWU bureaucracy. It means just 34.6 percent of CWU members have voted to back the CWU-EP Group agreements.

Seeking to play down the scale of the boycott, Ward and Walsh claimed the results were “comparable with most pay ballots of this nature”. But turnout in July 2023 for the CWU’s pro-company “Business Recovery Transformation and Growth Agreement” was 67.1 percent. That deal paved the way for the biggest assault on Royal Mail workers in history, and was rammed through with lies, threats and disinformation.

CWU officials waged a similar campaign this time around, portraying their three-year below-RPI pay deal as the best that was possible and citing Royal Mail’s “financial difficulties”. They also claimed the pay deal came with “no strings attached”.

In fact, EP Group’s pay offer was based on the Framework Agreement signed by CWU officials last December. That 12-page legal document agreed plans to dismantle the USO and impose punishing new workloads. It was cynically presented to members as “Part 1” of the deal they were voting on.

CWU’s bogus “reset”

Like criminals covering their tracks, the CWU rushed out a letter to branches a day after the ballot results, informing members: “the Union has written to the CEO of IDS Martin Seidenberg and the interim CEO of RMG Alistair Cochrane, expressing our major disappointment at the company’s failure to communicate and socialise with their managers at all levels, on the substance, content and radical nature of the EP Group/CWU agreement.

“It is also noticeable that Royal Mail communicate extensively with employees on Ofcom and the USO but have yet to say anything of substance to their employees on what the EP Group agreement is all about.”

This is subterfuge. Everything the company is doing was greenlighted by the CWU in their Framework Agreement with Kretinsky.

Having endorsed Royal Mail’s demands for a reduced USO and having agreed to pilot an “Optimised Delivery Model” with massive hikes to workloads, Ward and his cronies suddenly announced that “Royal Mail are not deploying the overall content and spirit of the agreement. This includes, not bringing to an end their deeply entrenched ‘It’s our business to run’ managerial culture, which inflicted the ongoing resourcing and customer quality crisis that continues to do untold damage to staff morale and the company’s future prospects.”

CWU officials are following a well-worn script: 1) Reach a negotiators’ agreement that erodes workers’ terms and conditions; 2) Unanimous endorsement by the CWU Postal Executive; 3) Launch a massive PR campaign calling for a Yes vote; 4) After the company gets everything it wants, issue a statement complaining it is “failing to consult” with the union on how to manage Royal Mail.

During Thursday night’s “CWU Live” event, presenter Michael Walker from Novara Media joined with Tony Bouch, CWU’s Outdoor Assistant Secretary, in hailing a “resounding yes” vote by members. When the legitimacy of the Yes vote was challenged by a worker, who pointed out that strike action ballots require a turnout of more than 50 percent, Walker replied that strike ballot thresholds are set in

law, before handing over to Bouch who was unable to explain why so few members had voted.

Walker dutifully recited the key talking points from CWU HQ, that officials had “expressed concerns” that the “agreement is not properly being implemented”, and that key parts of the agreement on “rebuilding Royal Mail” aren’t being shared with managers and therefore “aren’t being felt on the ground by CWU members.”

Bouch agreed, saying that Royal Mail seemed to be focusing exclusively on USO reform while ignoring Section 5 of the Framework Agreement that spoke about “resetting employee and industrial relations”, “new entrants harmonization”, overtime, scheduled attendance and sick pay.

But Section 5 links all of these “outstanding issues” to implementation of a “New Resourcing Model”—based on USO reform. This would be piloted at several offices and then rolled out across all 1,250 delivery units. The pilots began in February.

Bouch admitted what workers at pilot sites have known for months: the Optimised Delivery Model—collapsing four duties into three and driving up call rates by 30 percent—is a disaster. Despite massive resources being thrown into the pilot scheme, including an extra “4,500 hours” or “140 full-time equivalents” and “about 175 duties put back in” across the 35 pilot sites, the new delivery targets are still impossible to meet, even at the quietest time of the year.

Bouch announced the union has therefore submitted an “alternative delivery model” to EP Group, collapsing 8 duties into 7, that would see light items delivered on one walk and heavy items on the other, “So it would be 7 people covering 8 duties and we would pair them up in the right way, both the heavy and light. The 7th duty would be a singleton.”

Bouch added “Once we reach a national agreement” on the new delivery model “which will include a deployment plan” members will be balloted. He claimed the CWU had “made clear to Royal Mail that we will not be able to deploy anything [on the] USO until there’s a national agreement.” But the CWU has already agreed to implement USO reform “in a mutually beneficial way” (see Section 5.7 of the Framework Agreement). And it stipulates that job security will depend on “the overall business performance and market conditions at that time”.

The response of Royal Mail workers has been scathing.

A delivery worker from a pilot office told WSWS, “Bouch is finally admitting that the ODM has been a failure. This despite repeatedly saying that there was ‘no Plan B’ and that it had to work. What does he say to the hundreds of long service delivery staff who are demoralised, exhausted and left their jobs because they couldn’t do it anymore?

“The service to the public is a joke, with failures daily of 1st class and second class mail and packets lying in offices for days. His latest proposal of ‘heavy and light’ from what I can determine will need more hours, a change of duties and extra vans?

“Bouch is clearly out of his depth and seems to be relying on the goodwill of EP group (a hedge fund) which is gross stupidity. All of these changes are another step in the race-to-the-bottom and the workforce (especially in pilot offices) can see them for what they are.”

On YouTube @stephenembury2628 wrote “So the USO plan from the CWU is to do what we already struggling to do!! Great plan guys!”

@kevintaylor1789 wrote “We’ve got to prioritise tracked, first class and NHS letters. Got to get Specials done by 1pm. Parcels to redeliver from the previous day. Parcels to collect. Letter boxes to empty. When that’s done we take out the rest of mail and Door to Doors. Oh and don’t forget to do your lapsing first!!!! All in about 4 hours by the time you get out!!!! The Job is absolutely impossible now. God help the company at Christmas!”

@jima608 wrote “In 26 years in the job the only time delivery has worked was 1 postie doing one round and Drivers. Just get back to that. Stop with stupid pilots and CWU who haven’t done a delivery, or not one for years, trying to come up with dumb ideas!”

@DavidTutssel wrote, “We told you that the so-called ‘groundbreaking’ agreement was worthless.”

The ballot results make clear there is mounting anger toward the CWU bureaucracy over its collusion with the company that has resulted in back-breaking workloads and unprecedented stress, sickness, injury, early retirement and even premature death among postal workers who have given decades of loyal service to Royal Mail.

But anger is not enough. The company’s advantage is that the CWU executive and divisional reps function as an arm of management. The CWU executive’s advantage is that it does not yet face an organised rank-and-file opposition. This must be changed. The Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee has called a Zoom meeting on Sunday September 7 at 7pm to discuss the aftermath of the ballot and the way forward for postal workers. We urge postal workers to register and make plans to attend.



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