Royal Mail's DM26 rollout exposes CWU's partnership with management—organise the rank-and-file fightback

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Two months after forcing through the Universal Service Obligation (USO) deployment agreement, Communication Workers Union (CWU) General Secretary Dave Ward and Deputy General Secretary Martin Walsh have avoided facing postal workers publicly over its implementation.

Postal workers have repeatedly challenged their silence on the CWU's Facebook page and across social media. The Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee (PWRFC), which called for a No vote, emphasised that Ward and Walsh have no mandate for an agreement handing Royal Mail management and billionaire owner Daniel Kretinsky's EP Group exactly what they demanded.

The 65 to 35 percent vote in favour was based on an historically low turnout of just 32 percent in May's ballot, meaning barely one in five eligible CWU members voted for the agreement. The result exposed widespread distrust and is a no-confidence vote in the CWU leadership.

Before the ballot, Walsh mounted a gaslighting operation, seeking to browbeat opposition to the brutal restructuring. Having overseen Optimised Delivery Model (ODM) "pilots" at 35 delivery offices since March last year—based on three delivery workers doing the work of four and eliminating one in four jobs—he belatedly claimed to oppose the scheme.

This involved a rebranding exercise of ODM by Walsh with the adoption of "DM26": this model still accepts collapsing four duties into three, increased workloads, job cuts and the restructuring demanded by Royal Mail. The widespread abstention reflected workers' refusal to endorse this repackaged offensive.

The CWU bureaucracy's pro-company alliance was embedded in a second agreement portrayed as a first step towards "equalisation" for new entrants. Instead, it entrenches a two-tier workforce, locking new generations of postal workers into near minimum wage levels and inferior conditions, including unpaid meal breaks.

As of mid-July, 120 delivery offices have been placed onto DM26, ahead of rollout to all 1,250 delivery units. Yet Ward and Walsh are nowhere to be seen.

The CWU bureaucracy has restricted communication to its Letter to Branches. Its July 17 "DM26 Update", presented as a reassuring progress report, is a travesty. It reads as a joint implementation manual with Royal Mail.

Every stage of deployment is overseen through Regional Steering Groups bringing together Royal Mail operations managers with CWU divisional and area representatives. The document is saturated with corporate jargon about "Rapid Base Data Validation", "Scoping Exercises", "Resourcing Flow Charts" and "joint reviews".

Workers are told that implementation depends on validating routes, overtime, sickness levels, reserve duties, indoor plans and staffing levels. Managers and CWU officials jointly determine whether deployment proceeds.

These bureaucratic joint union-management procedures serve a single purpose: enforcement of an agenda whose outcome is predetermined: extracting £250 million in "cost reductions" agreed between Royal Mail and the CWU bureaucracy. Unable to campaign positively for the agreement, Walsh devoted their Yes campaign to denouncing those who urged rejection, recycling the Thatcher-Blair mantra that "there is no magic money tree."

There is no mystery as to how these "cost reductions " are to be made. They are to be extracted from postal workers through:

• slashing delivery duties;
• increasing workloads on the remaining workforce;
• replacing experienced postal workers with low-paid new entrants on inferior terms

The CWU update claims that in offices where DM26 has already been deployed "the majority seem to be working", pointing to higher delivery-point coverage and "positive" feedback without citing a single worker. It highlights contract uplifts for some part-time employees to full-time as proof that the agreement is delivering improvements.

The entire presentation is fraudulent. It admits that deployed offices are already experiencing difficulties but claims this is a "minority" of cases. However, the reasons cited—"high sickness levels" and "rising parcel volumes"—are endemic across the network. That such "difficulties" are happening at small and medium-sized offices selected for the first phase of DM26, and during the traditional lower-volume period of the year for deliveries, is a warning of what is being prepared at larger delivery units during the full roll-out.

Nowhere does the update address the reality postal workers confront daily: veteran posties driven out through injury and exhaustion; postal workers out beyond scheduled hours to try and complete deliveries; and the continued neglect of letters as parcel

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traffic dominates, enforced by management diktat.

What the CWU apparatus calls “USO deployment” is a regime for its dismantling.

Royal Mail has sent flyers notifying households of its sweeping reductions from a 6-day service, approved by regulator Ofcom last July, with second-class letters being delivered on alternate weekdays, while first-class quality of service has also been weakened through changes to next-day delivery targets.

The outcome is the deliberate degradation of a public service, based on a DM26 workplace regime against postal workers who have sustained the USO for decades.

Royal Mail continues to issue near-daily mail failure service announcements affecting postcodes across the country. Households are suffering intolerable delays to vital medical, legal and financial mail. Meanwhile, the cost of sending a first-class letter has risen to £1.80—almost double its 2022 level.

The CWU bureaucracy has co-authored this wrecking operation because it accepts EP Group’s drive to make Royal Mail “competitive” and “sustainable” for the company’s billionaire investors against the public’s right to a mail service and postal workers’ livelihoods, including their health, safety, pay, terms and conditions.

The future being prepared at Royal Mail is on display at Dutch postal operator PostNL—where Daniel Kretinsky holds a controlling 29 percent stake. It ended next-day delivery for standard letters last month. For a next-day service, customers must pay €3.95 (around £3.38) per letter, almost double the standard rate, and use one of the company’s parcel points rather than post boxes. This is only the first step, with plans to reduce mail delivery to just two days a week threatening at least 3,000 redundancies—one in five delivery jobs.

The benchmark for postal workers’ conditions is being set by the parcel and logistics industry, which relies on workers falsely classified as self-employed, stripping them of secure employment, sick pay, pensions and stable incomes. Amazon, DPD, Evri and other delivery operators have made relentless surveillance, impossible productivity targets and job insecurity the norm.

Every pro-company agreement by the CWU apparatus—including the sellout which ended the 2022-23 national strike and introduced the two-tier workforce—has transformed Royal Mail further along these lines.

What is required are rank-and-file committees in every delivery office, democratically controlled by postal workers themselves. Such a struggle requires the removal of the entrenched CWU bureaucracy, whose officials sit with management supervising workload increases, job cuts and gig-economy conditions.

These committees must demand proper staffing levels, safe workloads and full equalisation for new entrants’ pay and terms. They must link up workers between delivery offices to share information, expose the real impact of DM26 and coordinate resistance independently of the CWU apparatus to decide a common course of action.

This fight must break out of the artificial divisions imposed between Royal Mail workers and the wider logistics workforce such as Amazon, DPD, Evri and throughout the parcel industry, where corporate giants are driving down wages and conditions. The answer is not to imitate Amazon-style exploitation at Royal Mail but to mount a unified struggle against the race to the bottom.

The PWRFC calls on postal workers throughout Royal Mail to organise independently of the CWU bureaucracy:

- Build rank-and-file committees in every delivery office.
- Expose the reality of DM26 and the CWU-management partnership enforcing it.
- Defend the Universal Service Obligation as a social right against its destruction for private profit.
- Unite legacy workers and new entrants in a common struggle against the two-tier workforce.

Dave Ward has dedicated his public broadcasts to boosting the installation of new Labour Prime Minister Andy Burnham as a positive departure from two years of the Starmer government, having worked with the same government to rubber-stamp the £3.6 billion takeover of Royal Mail by Kretinsky, making EP Group sole owners.

Ward’s claims that Burnham’s agenda is to “rebalance economic and political power in favour of working people” exposes the shop-soiled goods being peddled by the union bureaucracy, with Burnham committed to tight fiscal rules, a deepened partnership with big business and welfare cuts to ramp up military spending.

Postal workers need a new leadership, built in irreconcilable opposition to the union bureaucracy and its subordination of the mail service to EP Group’s wrecking operation. The offensive against postal workers is international—from Carney’s Liberal government in Canada to Trump’s assault on the USPS—driven by the same agenda of privatisation, job cuts and Amazon-style exploitation.

Through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, the PWRFC unites workers across borders. Contact the PWRFC and organise to break the bureaucracy’s grip and build a coordinated international fightback.

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