

Socialist Party

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Postal workers - step up the action to win!

The third week of national strike action at Royal Mail has seen the bosses on the run. They fear the disruption of mail in the pre-Christmas period when over two billion letters, cards and parcels are processed through the system.

They thought they could force the union into making more concessions just as they did in the 2007 deal, which many postal workers (and how right they were) feared was the thin edge of the wedge. The plans of Royal Mail to cut jobs, intensify workloads and drive working conditions back into the Victorian age have been completely exposed by their actions since the 2007 deal.

The mass strikes have stopped the bosses in their tracks. They thought they could rule the roost and do what they like. Their plan was to break the union and introduce a complete change in everyday working arrangements to have the 'right to manage' without interference from the union or its reps.

Mark Higson, managing director of Royal Mail, said in frustration that the strikes "distract" from the peace efforts. He meant that the strikes have stopped the bosses from implementing their plans. Without the threat and reality of the strikes the union would have been defeated long ago.

The solidarity of the strikers and the support they are getting from other workers has opened up the possibility of a famous victory if the CWU leadership shows the same determination in negotiations as their members have shown on the picket lines.

The week before last, the union leaders thought they had a form of words that meant they could call off the strikes to continue talks. But the Royal Mail bosses tried to go too far; they said that the deal was no more than an acceptance by the union to have negotiations without any strikes.

This would have given the bosses all they want, as they have probably got most of the changes they want this side of Christmas through already. Their reported intention is once Christmas is out of the way, to again move onto the offensive and continue their programme of job cuts and heavier workloads for those who would be left. This would include the gradual adoption of new machinery in mail centres with most Royal Mail jobs becoming part-time and back-breaking delivery



loads further increasing.

Unfortunately, Dave Ward, CWU deputy general secretary and a leading negotiator in the talks, was quoted in the press complaining that one problem is that because the union reps are subject to annual election, they are in "perpetual election mode" and therefore have to listen to their members. He told the Guardian that the union is "prepared to hold elections less frequently to improve relations with management".

However, the postal executive of the CWU stopped the union's negotiators accepting the bosses' recent proposals and instead insisted that there is a bottom line beyond which they are not prepared to go. This included that Royal Mail should stop hiring temporary staff meant to break the strike, a commitment not to continue with privatisation plans and an agreement that postal staff would be paid overtime to clear up the growing backlog of postal items.

The CWUs legal challenge to stop Royal Mail hiring temporary staff has resulted in the Job Centre refusing to send unemployed workers for scab jobs whilst the injunction hearing is taking place. This has further strengthened the strikes and also shows the potential for other public sector workers, such

as those in the PCS who work at the Job Centre, to practically support striking posties. However, it will not be through the courts alone that this dispute is won - strikes and mass action is necessary. CWU members in Scotland have organised a march on the Bathgate delivery office scab centre for Monday 9th November. Action such as this should be taken up by the CWU in other areas, alongside escalating the strike action.

The Tories, from the sidelines, have threatened that once in power they will sort out the union once and for all by fully privatising the post service. To encourage the would-be privateers, the £10 billion pension deficit will be covered by a Tory government, so the privateers will be guaranteed all the profits while taxpayers fund the losses.

Also, the Tories want to change the law to stop strike action if there is not a majority of the workforce in favour. The percentage of CWU postal workers who voted was 67%, and of them, 76% voted for strike action, but this would only just be enough because the Tories want all those who do not vote to be deemed as against.

One Tory academic even proposed that such measures should be spread across the whole public sector to stop strikes. He proposed that future national strike ballots in local government should only be effective if there is a majority in each council in favour, not as at present where all the votes across all councils are counted together and a simple majority decides the issue.

The announced post strikes this week and next (Friday 6 November and Monday 9 November) will for the first time involve all CWU members in Royal Mail coming out together. This is a recognition that sectional strikes of sorting offices one day and delivery offices the next have not been enough.

But it is becoming increasingly clear as well that single day strikes may not be enough either. If, after this weekend, the bosses have not agreed to end their attacks, the postal executive of the CWU should be prepared to call an all-out strike until they do.

The CWU members are fighting for all the public sector unions. If the other unions stand to one side and allow the government to beat the postal workers then it will come after the rest of the sector sooner or later. There should be a clear message going out from the CWU leadership to the other unions that it is time to give greater support to the struggle.

The letter to the Guardian that was signed by some union leaders (see last week's Socialist) was regrettable because it

blamed the union as well as the bosses for the situation. The time for half measures is over. The postal workers have shown that they will fight back in a united fashion, now all the public sector unions should give full support, and prepare the ground for a one-day public sector strike in defence of jobs and public services. The CWU should organise city wide rallies and demos in support of the postal workers. At these the CWU should call for solidarity of all workers in defence of the public sector as a whole. And now is the time to consider stepping up the action to an all-out post strike until victory is won.

The Socialist Party calls for:

- ▶ If the bosses refuse to back off following this weeks strike days, then the union should call an all-out strike.
- ▶ No more “modernisation” deals - end the attacks once and for all.
- ▶ Defend all jobs, pensions and conditions.
- ▶ No to increased workloads.
- ▶ Defend the union, defend the reps.
- ▶ Bring back ‘in house’ all previously privatised work.
- ▶ For a united fight to defend public services across all public sector trade unions leading to a one day public sector-wide strike.

socialism 2009

Socialism 2009 is a weekend of political discussion and debate hosted by the Socialist Party. For trade union activists, it is an unmissable weekend - Socialist Party members visiting your picket line will have leaflets outlining the full event. On **Sunday 8 November**, a mass rally will be held at **3pm in Friends Meeting House, Euston Road, central London**. This will be addressed by, amongst others, John Denton London Region CWU secretary. Following the rally, there will be a meeting of Socialist Party members and supporters in the CWU to discuss the dispute - all postal workers are invited to the rally and meeting following it.

SATURDAY - SUNDAY 7 - 8 NOVEMBER 2009
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