

OF  
A  
POSTAL  
WORKER



# Determined to win

**R**OYAL Mail management have for months now been running a propaganda war against the strikes and in favour of their plans for postal workers. Our line manager gives us regular team briefings on the dangers of a strike and what a great idea team working is. He shouts out for everyone to gather round him, and then, like a nursery school teacher surrounded by his flock, reads out a leaflet on how good team working is, how damaging the strike will be and how unreasonable the union is. But we are no docile audience: usually he is stopped repeatedly by people heckling and interrupting him. He then hands out copies of the leaflet, which are greatly prized as little footballs or paper aeroplanes. All the propagandising line manager has achieved is to add a small extra amount of irritation and resentment.

The day before the first strike, after a team meeting on how Royal Mail would lose Direct Mail (junk mail) business because of strike action, one lad spoke for all of us when he shouted out that he couldn't give a toss about Royal Mail's business because Royal Mail don't give a toss about us.

The first strike day was inspiring: out of over a thousand of us only a couple of regular workers went to work. I was worried about those on temporary contracts. In our office all new recruits are on rolling temporary contracts, each one covering only a month or so. Then, if they don't like you, you go up the road. The bosses think they have temporaries like me by the short and curlies. These strikes have proved them wrong.

The union called all the temporaries together in special meetings to explain the strike, giving a commitment to defend any temps who are victimised. In the weeks before the strikes temps were systematically recruited to the union. Despite problems in other areas, in my area office not one temp scabbed. As a temp standing on the picket line, this made my day. And, of course, it made my job more secure.

What are we fighting for? The six-day

week and the very early start postal workers have to endure is a real pig. It means you only get Saturday night when you can really hit the town. Not surprisingly a lot of postal workers use strike days as days off and the night before a strike to go out. It helps! On the first day, the strike picket grew as hung-over workers arrived late and the night-shift pickets returned from a short kip. We jeered at scabbing managers driving Post Office vans in and out of the depot, and one picket kicked a van, while the slowly assembling press-pack filmed and photographed us.

Later we were to discover that managers who routinely sack workers for minor mistakes had lost registered letters, left pillar keys on the street, and generally messed up big time when it came to actually doing some real work.

Later in the day, we were all taken to support the very trendily suited joint General Secretary of our union Alan Johnson at a press stunt. We overcame our reticence and cheered Johnson for the cameras, not forgetting that Alan had to be pushed into the strike ballot and the dispute. Someone near me muttered "Nice suit, where's your spine, Alan?"

**Fifth day's strike, Wednesday 14 August.** Everyone is relieved that the dispute is still going and that the terrible deal Johnson and the negotiating team accepted has been rejected by the national union's Postal Executive.

There was chaos last week in my office when the scheduled Friday strike was called off on the Thursday. The Postal Executive had called off the strike because Alan Johnson and the negotiating team said they would get a deal from the ACAS talks over the weekend. Tens of people in my office missed work or turned up late. We were all very fed up, especially the union reps who bore the brunt of the anger. No one knew what was going on. The media were full of reports of the end of the postal strike.

Johnson did get a deal, accepting the very things we struck against — team working, and Royal Mail's delivery proposals.

The Postal Exec rightly kicked out the deal and organised a national briefing meeting for union reps, to explain. Johnson and the negotiators got a real roasting there.

Once people learned about the deal they couldn't believe that Johnson had wanted to accept all the major things we had struck against.

A lot of people did not know about ultra right-wing "moderniser" Johnson's cosy relationship with Tony Blair, or his record in the union. After the experience of the deal fiasco a lot of people think he should go.

The management cranked up their propaganda machine after the deal, whining "We shook hands with Alan Johnson on the deal", "Why hasn't the union put the deal to you?"

More team briefings, more management lies! They have a serious credibility problem.

In my office, the union held canteen meetings and circulated a London Postal District Committee pamphlet that demolished the deal. Everyone thinks the deal is crap.

On the seventh one-day strike the London District Committee organised a rally at Westminster Central Hall. People came up from the picket line or made their own way to Westminster for 12.30.

The rally was a real inspiration, with up to 1,000 postal workers cheering to the echo the speakers from the London District Committee, who analysed Royal Mail's plans to end the second delivery, while imposing job cuts and simultaneously increasing our workload (the so-called 'team working'), and urged rejection of the deal. Speaker after speaker from the floor denounced the deal.

Mention of Johnson was met with angry shouts against the besuited, expensively coiffed and well-manicured sell-out merchant. The message was clear, and very loud: the strike is more solid than ever. Postal workers are determined to defeat Royal Mail.

*Name of author has been withheld to protect them from victimisation.*

# London postalworkers' leader speaks out: "We must dig in for a long dispute"

**T**HE Communication Workers' Union London Postal District Committee has played a leading role in the current postal dispute. Since day one of the dispute the London District Committee has pushed for a defence of the second delivery and total opposition to 'teamworking.'

On 2 March they convened a meeting of District Committees from all over the country to discuss the Employee Agenda negotiations. It was this initiative, at first strongly opposed by union leader Alan Johnson, that forced the national Postal Executive to call a strike ballot.

On the strike day of Wednesday 14 August the LDC organised a protest march to the Royal Mail headquarters, which, following a police ban, was changed to a mass rally attended by up to 1,000 rank and file postal workers.

*Workers' Liberty* spoke to London Regional Secretary Dave Ward.

**What has the LDC done in this dispute?**

We have set a positive agenda. We helped organise the original meeting on 2 March. We organised a rally on Wednesday 14 August. We have regular meetings with branches, keeping people updated and exchanging views on tactics.

We have just published a pamphlet, *The Deal*, on the last document proposed by Royal Mail.

We see dangers in the proposed agreement itself and also a danger to the union's future independence.

Once you get involved in this type of agreement, it dictates the way the union operates, and you end up with a staff association, instead of an independent

trade union. That is a major part of Royal Mail's "Employee Agenda", with its theme of "The Social Partnership".

**Is there anyone in the CWU who wants to go in that direction?**

I think there are elements of the leadership who know what the social partnership is about, and who are quite happy to see this union head in that direction.

**How solid is the strike in London?**

Very. Only one office, Plaistow, a very small delivery office of 25 people, has worked on strike days.

With the escalation of the strike I think London will stay solid. People have chosen sides now. I don't expect the longer strike to have an adverse effect on us.

I also think now is the right time to go for a four-day strike.

The Executive now recognise that the deal has been rejected. They know it will not go out to ballot, and because Royal Mail won't talk to us, they've got no alternative but to look for further action.



Post: striking against "teamworking", for a shorter working week and a better service

**What do you think of the way the negotiating team have led the dispute so far?**

I think our negotiators made a major error and gave Royal Mail an opportunity to attack us.

First and foremost, they should not have spoken to the press before the Executive Council meeting. I think they should deal with the press in a similar way to ASLEF, who do not talk to the press before negotiators have met the executive.

**Do you think their negotiating behaviour reflects their attitude to the dispute?**

To be perfectly honest, Alan Johnson believes this is a good deal. The deal suits his view of the direction the union should take. He thinks he got the best deal he could get. Some of us disagree with that.

My view is that at this stage of the dispute we don't need to gang up against Alan Johnson. I don't see any point in that. He is the General Secretary of the union. As long as he runs with the decisions of the Executive I am happy for

him to go on being the General Secretary.

He is a very talented man who, unfortunately, has different ideas to quite a lot of the rest of us about where we should be going.

That will have to be dealt with after the dispute. When we have a settlement, people will make their views known on that.

## *What are the lessons of the dispute?*

The main lesson people can learn from this dispute, outside of what is in the deal, is about the direction of the union. Members should be able to see quite clearly that certain elements of the leadership are trying to take the union towards "social partnership." We will have to make a decision as to whether or not we support those politics or oppose them.

## *Will the events in this dispute lead to a growth of the Broad Left on the postal side of the CWU?*

I am all for people of similar views getting together and speaking on issues as those issues arise. There is nothing wrong with people from different parts of the country getting together and drawing up policies. That should be done when the situation demands it, be dependent on the issue rather than on any formal organisational links.

I think the meeting we helped to call on 2 March created an environment for the union to debate issues, for rank and file activists to meet and express their views.

I have felt for some time that we must dig in for a long dispute. That's why, tactically, it would have been a mistake to call an all-out strike at this stage. The issues are so fundamental in this dispute, particularly around 'team working' and the delivery side of it, that we should play a long game, and gradually up the ante at various stages.

That has to be our tactic unless the Post Office do something that forces us to change our position. We must remain flexible. We have got to keep up the propaganda, keep up the information to our members.

The London District Committee document on the 'Deal' has gone down very well because it takes apart what 'team working' really is, using cartoons to push the point home.

People must understand just how important the delivery issue is going to be. In my view, this is an attempt by the Post Office to introduce a one-delivery postal service, without having public

debate or a political row about it.

The deal lays the foundation for a one-delivery service after the year 2000. For Royal Mail it is the deal of the century but for postal workers it is a voyage into the unknown. We can not accept that. The industry is not in a crisis. Royal Mail is one of the most successful postal services in the world. I think we are entitled to ask, why does it have to be this way?

## *What support have local Labour Parties and CWU sponsored MPs given?*

Southwark and Bermondsey Labour Party have passed a motion supporting the postal workers. Obviously it is disappointing, the response from the rest of the Labour Party, but it is not surprising. It's ironic that the Lib-Dems have come out with full backing for postal workers. I don't expect the Labour Party to change their position on the strike.

Labour MPs should put our case forward. They should attend meetings and show our members that they support them.

It's unlikely that Alan Johnson will raise the strike openly on the Labour National Executive. That would not be in line with his previous position.

I would imagine some members of the Postal Executive of the CWU will be saying it's time we put Labour on the spot, and there is nothing wrong with that.

## *What support have you had from trade unions? What can other trade unionists do?*

We have had offers of support, use of rooms, equipment etc. from a number of trade unions and from colleagues on the engineering and clerical side of the CWU. We are very grateful for their support.

I think the best thing trade unionists can do is to go out and spread the message about what we are challenging in this dispute, and about its wider implications. I think this is an interesting dispute and it needs more media coverage. The very fact that we are opposing team working and new management techniques is something people should wake up to.

I personally believe there are a lot of people in trade unions, rank and file activists, who perhaps are not totally aware of the direction their own unions are going in, who reject this argument for social partnership. This dispute should bring that out into the open and allow other trade unionists to reflect on the way their unions are dealing with these issues.

# Bourgeois pride

In every age the left, before it can do anything else, has to confront the pretensions of those in power, and debunk them, especially when, as now, the ruling class is prosperous, triumphant and confident.

For most of the 19th century, radicals and socialists quoted, reprinted and recited these splendid lines from John Keats' poem "Isabella", which pour scorn on the pretensions and pride of a bourgeoisie which lived by mean and inhuman exploitation.

With her two brothers this fair lady dwelt,  
Enriched from ancestral merchandise,  
And for them many a weary hand did swelt  
In torched mines and noisy factories,  
And many once proud-quiver'd loins did melt  
In blood from stinging whip; with hollow eyes  
Many all day in dazzling river stood,  
To take the rich-ored driftings of the flood.

For them the Ceylon diver held his breath,  
And went all naked to the hungry shark;  
For them his ears gush'd blood; for them in death  
The seal on the cold ice with piteous bark  
Lay full of darts; for them alone did seethe  
A thousand men in troubles wide and dark;  
Half-ignorant, they turn'd an easy wheel,  
That set sharp racks at work, to pinch and peel.

Why were they proud? Because their marble founts  
Gush'd with more pride than do a wretch's tears?  
Why were they proud? Because fair orange-mounts  
Were of more soft ascent than lazarus stairs?  
Why were they proud? Because red-lined accounts  
Were richer than the songs of Grecian years?  
Why were they proud? again we ask aloud,  
Why in the name of Glory were they proud?