



The future of communications and logistics

- **Public service with a unionised workforce?**
- **Or a free-fire zone for profiteers?**

The battle now under way between the postal workers and Royal Mail management will shape the whole future of trade unionism in the crucial communications and logistics sector.

This is a battle that Royal Mail bosses have been looking for. They have been predicting a “protracted dispute”. They claim that Royal Mail workers are 40% underworked and 25% overpaid compared with the private carriers. Unnamed management sources have been telling the press that postal workers risk going the same way as the miners and car workers.

Royal Mail bosses have gone out of their way to make it clear that they are not prepared to “do business” with the CWU negotiators. For instance, last week neither Leighton, nor Crozier, the two top executives at Royal Mail, were prepared to meet with the CWU to examine ways of avoiding this dispute. Instead, they sent their underlings, people who couldn’t possibly make any significant concessions, to last weeks “talks”. This was a clear slap in the face for the senior CWU negotiators.

Royal Mail bosses are not prepared to discuss with the CWU the underlying issue of the future of the post office. All they are willing to do is “sit down with the CWU to explain again the absolute need for Royal Mail to modernise”.

For Royal Mail management this dispute is about two related and interlinked issues:

- breaking the power of the CWU;
- implementing a programme of modernisation, and market liberalisation.

The aim is to abolish the Post Office as it presently exists, that is, as a universal public service that delivers to every address in the country no matter how remote.

“Race to the bottom”: beat it or join it!

The postal workers and their union, the CWU, are one of the most important bastions of well organised workplace trade unionism remaining amongst “unskilled” blue collar workers.

By applying the basic trade union principles of solidarity — the idea that unity is strength and an injury to one is an injury to all — postal workers have protected their pay, their agreements and much of their terms and conditions in the face of the global race to the bottom which has afflicted other workers in blue collar jobs throughout private industry. This

trade union strength rests in part on the fact that the post office has remained essentially a public service.

Royal Mail bosses want to put an end to this. They have reason to hope for backing from Gordon Brown’s New Labour government. Their agenda is to see postal workers exposed to the same “rigours of competition” and “discipline of the market” — the phrases are from New Labour’s new Clause Four — as faced by other workers in the deliveries and logistics business. That means casualisation and wage cuts. If postal workers want to see the future, then they can take a look at DHL, where delivery workers face cuts in pay of over 60% per job, or redundancy.

Unity is strength, across the public sector

Mark Serwotka, General Secretary of the civil service union PCS, has talked of co-ordinating strike action with the CWU. That is a start.

But what is needed is not just talk, but for all the public sector unions to unite in strike action to break the government’s public sector pay freeze.

PCS has a live ballot mandate for industrial action on pay and jobs.

The teachers’ union NUT has decided to ballot “in the autumn term” about the Government’s refusal to agree a proposal by the official pay review board to activate the proviso in their 2006-8 pay deal saying it should be reopened if inflation rose above 3%.

The public service union Unison has decided to ballot both health workers and local government workers in the coming months over pay claims clashing with Gordon’s Brown 2% pay freeze.

Our demand must be that all these unions seize the moment and bring forward their own ballots and their own action to join battle alongside the post workers.

Levy to back the post workers

Royal Mail bosses are set for a long dispute, not just a couple of one-day strikes. Postal workers need to be prepared, too. The CWU should start now with an appeal to all other unions, and workers, to contribute levies to a fund for strike pay for postal workers.

Mobilising the movement

If the trade union leaders try to restrict solidarity with the postal workers to behind the scenes lobbying, then they will fail. The trade unions and Labour rank and file must rally behind the CWU.

The issue has to be forced on the National Executive in the Parliamentary Labour Party, and in every constituency in the country. The Labour leadership should not be allowed to give support and succour to the enemies of the CWU.

What activists across the labour movement can do to support the postal workers, and what the CWU should call on them to do:

- Invite postal workers to speak at union meetings, workplaces and colleges
- Liaise with other trade unionists and supporters to set up local postal workers' support groups
- Organise solidarity delegations from unions, workplaces, colleges or schools to the postal workers' picket lines
- Organise collections in support of the postal workers in workplaces
- Raise the issue of support for the CWU in local Labour Parties. Mandate Labour MPs to support the CWU. Lobby MPs' surgeries to put them on the spot. Put CWU-sponsored MPs, especially, on the spot.
- Organise in other trade unions to bring forward their disputes and fight alongside the postal workers.
- Campaign for the TUC to call a national day of action in support of the postal workers and in opposition to the public sector pay freeze.

The private carriers

Royal Mail bosses say that their plans for drastic job-cutting and wage-cutting are necessary in order to enable Royal Mail to hold its own against the private carriers.

The truth is the opposite. Royal Mail bosses want to make Royal Mail just like the private carriers. They do not want to run a universal service. They would like to run a profit-maximising privatised business alongside all the other profit-maximising private businesses.

They want an industry which is a free-fire zone for profiteering. The private carriers want that too, and we should not rule out the possibility that Royal Mail bosses will do deals with private carriers to help scab on CWU strikes.

Equally, workers in the private carriers have an interest in the CWU winning this battle. It is only the CWU's organisation in Royal Mail that holds wages and conditions in the communications and logistics industry up anywhere near a decent level.

Controlling the dispute

This could be a long dispute, and involve surprises or new tactics from the Royal Mail bosses.

It is essential that rank-and-file postal workers are fully involved in all the decisions the union will have to make during the dispute. Control should be in the hands of national meetings of reps, and elected local strike committees, not just the top full-time officials.

Public service or profit?

By Pete Keenlyside (CWU Executive, personal capacity)

As a member of the executive of the Communication Workers Union I want to appeal to the broad labour and trade union movement to rally to the postal workers in our dispute with Royal Mail.

People should be under no illusions. This is a very serious dispute indeed. Unattributed quotes have appeared in the newspapers, apparently originating from Royal Mail management, making parallels between postal workers and the miners and car workers. We all know what has happened to the British car industry and the British mining industry. What postal workers are now asking is this: is it Royal Mail management's intention to destroy the postal service in the same way as the Tories destroyed the mines?

People also have to remember that in order to destroy the mining industry the Tories and the Coal Board had to first of all take on and try to break the union, the NUM.

The fight the CWU is embarking on is not just a battle over wages. We see this as a dispute about the future of the Post Office.

For the CWU this is about keeping a publicly owned, publicly run concern that provides a universal letters service to everyone in the UK. We are opposing management's business plan which will mean bigger profits for them but a poorer service for the public and worse pay and conditions for postal workers. We want not just a decent pay rise, but a veto on management's disastrous plans for Royal Mail.

Like other postal workers I'm delighted to hear that some trade union leaders — like Mark Serwotka from the civil service union PCS — are talking about linking up their fight with ours. But as we all know action speaks louder than words. So when we announce the next stage of our campaign we will be looking for other unions to join in taking action.

We will also be asking people to recognise the political dimension of this dispute. Royal Mail remains a publicly owned company answerable in the last analysis to the Labour government. The CWU has recently decided to have a push on fighting for our policies in the Labour Party. This dispute now makes that push absolutely vital. It would be great to see every Labour MP put on the spot over this dispute. I'm sure that CWU branches would welcome invites to ward and constituency Labour Parties to explain our case and maybe put our point of view over to the MP too.

Support the postal workers!

How can we support the postal workers?

A forum for discussion among union activists

2pm, Sunday 1 July, Resource Centre, 356 Holloway Road (Holloway Road tube)

Part of Ideas for Freedom, a weekend of socialist discussion and debate organised by the Alliance for Workers' Liberty.

29 June-1 July. For more details see www.workersliberty.org/ideas

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