

BT, mail, post: coordinate and escalate action

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IT IS a sign of the times that for the first time in its history workers across the three main sectors organised by the Communications Workers Union—Royal Mail, Post Office and British Telecom—are all on strike or have a mandate for action. The different sectors face different problems, but have two things in common: the need for an inflation-proof pay rise and a break with the strategy of one-day protest strikes that drags out the dispute.

Post Office workers led the way earlier this summer, with 1,500 workers taking two days of strike action after a 97% yes vote. Next up, BT employees held their first national ballot since privatisation in 1987—and smashed it with over 90% voting for action. Thirty thousand engineers and 9,000 call centre workers are on strike today.

115,000 CWU members in Royal Mail and Parcelforce launched their ballot with hundreds of gate meetings outside depots, and homemade videos of staff proudly wearing ‘I’m voting yes!’ stickers or posting their ballot, yes box ticked. Result: 97% for action!

Pay cuts

The common link is the refusal by privately owned Royal Mail and BT and public sector Post Office to grant pay rises that keep pace with inflation. Despite ballooning boardroom wealth the working class is being driven into penury.

The CWU’s new united industrial campaign and its political message of building a mass movement against the cost of living crisis mean activists across the union have an opportunity to work together, fighting for a more militant approach, including

coordinated strikes and common claims.

FTSE 100 firm BT offered a flat-rate £1,500 to 58,000 frontline workers. That represents an 8% pay rise for lowest paid but only 3% for the higher grades—an attempt to play divide and rule, robbing one section to pay off another. But it leaves all workers facing a real-terms pay cut, since inflation, even at the lower CPI measure, is already 9% and will hit double figures by the autumn.

Success

After years of attacks on terms and conditions and bullying management, this insulting pay offer was the straw that broke the camel’s back. On 30 June, the CWU announced that 28,500 engineers in BT subsidiary Openreach had voted a massive 95% in favour of strike action (74% turnout) while 12,350 BT workers voted 91% for a strike (58% turnout).

These votes are impressive, with thousands working from home since the pandemic and engineers on their own, out in the streets all day. This shows that ballots can be won even in disadvantageous conditions. In addition this is the first time that multiple

call centres have been successfully balloted. It will be the largest call centre strike ever, a landmark for activists to build on in other companies.

Royal Mail workers, offered a measly 2% despite hundreds of millions handed over to shareholders, inevitably gave the CWU a hat-trick. A second ballot on a full-scale corporate assault on terms, conditions and zero-hours contracts is underway (see overleaf).

Coordination

Activists and reps in the various CWU sections have different issues but similar debates on strategy: one-day Post Office strikes every month will not crack the company and the same is true for BT and Royal Mail workers. Hard hitting action, escalating to all-out if necessary, is the way to bring the issue to a head quickly.

But now there is the opportunity to come together and raise the stakes further. **We should be arguing for coordinated strike days, joint rallies and marches, and joint reps meetings to build solidarity, unite the campaigns and fight for a real pay rise indexed to inflation.**



workers power Solidarity with the RMT!

RAISE PAY
CUT PROFITS
TAX THE RICH
STRIKE TO WIN.

COUNCILS OF ACTION: In every town, city and workplace, form a council of action to coordinate and lead the struggle. They are the backbone of the movement.

INFLATION-PROOF PAY: Demand a real pay rise indexed to inflation. This is the only way to ensure that your wages keep pace with the rising cost of living.

INTO THE FUTURE: For workers' control of the economy, we must build a mass movement of workers' organisations. This is the only way to bring about a socialist society.

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Reject royal blackmail

ON 19 JULY, the CWU reported a thumping 97% vote by Royal Mail workers to strike against an insulting 2% pay rise. A second ballot is on the way over sweeping attacks to terms and conditions by management.

The next day chairman Keith Williams claimed the company is losing £1 million a day—and threatened to break up the company if workers don't accept those changes.

He is offering to open the books for CWU officials to examine. As the saying goes, there are lies, damned lies and statistics, easily manipulated by accountants. It's true that the volume of parcels and letters drops in summer—but not that much!

The truth is Royal Mail has dragged its feet hiring staff to fill vacancies, so it has to fork out for agency workers. That's why costs have risen while parcel numbers have declined. Once mail volumes start rising again that will reverse, up to the usual Christmas bonanza.

In fact Royal Mail pulled the exact same trick in summer 2020—just before two years of record profits! Royal Mail has made a respectable profit every year for the past two decades.

Postal workers worked through the pandemic to deliver mail and were applauded as key workers. Now they are being thrown under the bus. **They should reject this blackmail, vote yes in the second ballot, and insist that strike action is brought forward to show they are serious.**

Postal workers should have the backing of the entire trade union movement and the public, raising alarm at the threat to the daily delivery guarantee and making the case for the **renationalisation of Royal Mail without a penny in compensation** to blood-sucking billionaire shareholders.

Defend the right to strike

IN THE dying days of the Johnson government, a new law has been passed allowing bosses to break strikes by employing temporary agency staff. Business secretary Kwasi Kwarteng boasted, "This was a criminal offence. Now it's an option for business." Tory policy summed up in a tweet!

The new attack represents a serious tightening of what Tony Blair enthusiastically described as "the most restrictive anti-union laws in Europe." As if this wasn't enough, Tory leadership candidate Liz Truss has promised a further crackdown if she wins. Her proposals would institute minimum service levels on "critical national infrastructure"—effectively removing the right to strike for millions of workers in transport, energy, education, health and the post.

RMT general secretary Mick Lynch described the changes as "the latest step in a clampdown on democratic dissent, which every trades unionist and democrat must oppose".

Too right—but how? 12 trade unions have filed a legal challenge to the new law. We should use every means to overturn the changes—but we don't have to wait for the bosses' courts to decide.

We have to make the law unworkable through mass, militant and decisive action the minute it is resorted to. This means mounting mass pickets outside workplaces. Elected strike committees should organise stewarding of pickets to defend them from police harassment.

Skilled workers like engineers, train drivers or teachers are unlikely to be affected immediately. But cleaners, security guards, retail and hospitality workers are under threat. We need to be prepared to take solidarity action to help any section of workers targeted by this new law. Almost all effective trade union action—solidarity strikes, mass pickets, workplace voting—is outlawed. But enough is enough. If we all act together, they can't arrest us all! ■

Build solidarity committees

IT'S THE END of July and the heat wave of strikes shows no sign of abating. As well as BT, Aslef and the RMT we have declared ballots for strike action in Royal Mail, in 39 Further Education Colleges, Post Offices, Arriva Northwest, London tube workers... even the barristers have judged their pay offer to be criminally low!

In September others are likely to join the queue: civil servants facing job losses and pay cuts; NHS workers clapped in the pandemic, now having their pay clipped; council workers and teachers, likewise; and London buses facing huge cuts.

By striking together we can dominate the news. Other workers, not in the frontline today, will demand their union ballots and joins the strikers tomorrow.

We need to take advantage of the fact that strikes for more pay are hugely popular. When wages are turning to dust while profits and City bonuses are turning in double digit growth, people instinctively know the unions are right. Now is the time to pile in with wage demands and recruit non-union workers into the movement.

Escalation

But coordination logically poses the question of escalation. If we want to make the strikes bigger so they can become a rallying point for every other group of workers, then we also need to make them decisive.

Some RMT members have rightly criticised the decision to follow up the three days of action in June (the first of which was coordinated

with the tube strike) with a single isolated strike day at the end of July.

The bosses and the Tories know how to escalate their response to us. Royal Mail threw down the gauntlet by unilaterally tearing up posties' terms and conditions, forcing the CWU to organise a fresh ballot. Liz Truss has escalated by calling for more anti-union laws.

It is a law of the class struggle that when the enemy ups the stakes, we are ready to respond in kind. All unions in dispute need to coordinate their strike dates from now on and if possible their claims too.

Every union needs to call sharply escalating strike action: three days in the first week; then a whole week; then all out indefinite.

Every trade unionist needs to demand their union ballots now so they can join the fight. Those who are not in a union should join and recruit their workmates too.

We all need to form local strike support committees—councils of action—that can draw in representatives from every union branch and workplace, every school, college and university, every housing estate and neighbourhood. Their task is simple:

- To turn the strike wave into a class struggle;
- To make the bosses pay for the cost of living crisis;
- To turn these defensive struggles into a united offensive against the capitalist system that is the root cause of exploitation and poverty. ■

WHAT IS WORKERS POWER?

THIS BULLETIN is produced by CWU members who support the revolutionary socialist organisation WORKERS POWER.

We support all workers in struggle against the bosses. We fight to turn every struggle into a conscious fight against the whole profit system. It is the system that is the problem, not just this or that boss or government.

Behind the Tories and their billionaire media backers lies the capitalist system. It is a system that puts millions on the dole, seeks to drive down wages and destroys the environment. It is a system that diverts attention from its crimes by bloody wars, and by dividing up the workers amongst themselves by promoting racism and sexism.

We want to destroy that system and replace it with one where production is guided by the needs of the many,

not the profits of the few. That means taking the wealth of society; the banks and the major firms, into the hands of the working class and drawing up a democratic plan of production under workers' control.

To get this we have to smash the capitalist state; the police, courts, army and judiciary and replace it with a new kind of state based on democratically elected and accountable workers' councils.

The working class has the power to do this. It is rediscovering its enormous power to defeat the bosses through strike action. We think that power should be used to smash capitalism and build a new kind of society without poverty, oppression and war.

If you agree with what we say—join us.