Communication Worker #8

Bulletin of the Communication Workers' Network - Solidarity Federation

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REPICKING OVER THE

WHAT'S REALLY BEHIND THE RECENT STRIKE IN SHEFFIELD?

In Sheffield, there was a local agreement signed by both management and CWU for a full cross-functional repick within 6 months of the move to the new mailcentre. 18 months down the line, still no repick. Sheffield's management have repeatedly stalled and shown their general incompetence in full glory. Now, management are trying to use The Way Forward national agreement, which states that repicks should occur only if there are significant changes in duties. They now claim that only 28 duties have significantly changed, and so it is only these they want to repick.



Other local issues include changing of breaks for MAA duties and extending 21.30 finish contracts to 22.00. Crucially, since the revision hasn't been implemented locally, since May, people have been working to their old 41.5 hour week contracts, but only getting paid for 40 hours (see *Unpaid Overtime* overleaf).

While trying to claim that national agreements should take precedence over local ones, they are also dissolving the parts of The Way Forward they do not like - for example, the attendance procedure (shift allowance while sick) and sick pay (sick pay while sick). They want people to get no employer sick pay at all. They want to take us back to Victorian times.

The starting point for getting rid of sick pay is to inflict it on new recruits in areas like the new address interpretation centres, where they are looking to take people on at 'competitive rates' i.e. minimum wage, no sick pay – this is clearly the thin end of the wedge.

Consignia are also starting to use their 'commercial freedom' which Tony Blair is so keen on. With their new Logistics toy, they can contemplate delivering pizzas along with letters, while making backroom deals with private firms over sorting their parcels. It is not difficult to predict Consignia's negotiating line within the near future – 'well, we are now in a commercial market place so we need to tighten our belts and face the new challenges – if you go on strike, business will go elsewhere and you will be made redundant'. Or words to that effect.

They want CWU to take strike action, so they can justify being heavy-handed. The Labour Government, the regulators and the Consignia bosses are all looking for a way to manipulate and force the commercialisation and privatisation agenda. The big game plan is clear – while the public letters bit - Royal Mail itself - will probably always stay in the public sector, this is only 8% of Consignia and the rest will be subject to creeping privatisation. They see CWU as slowing Consignia down and hindering its profits, and they would like to break it up like Thatcher did with the Miners in the '80s.

In short, Consignia have spent all their cash – including the profits that we the workers have all made for them – on buying up foreign parcel firms and other capital acquisitions. They are desperately trying to become an international player. They see the future as delivering anything but letters. Now, having spent up, they are skint. The vultures are gathering around. Once again, they are picking over our bones for more scraps of profit.

When the Tories wanted to privatise the post, the CWU ran a successful public campaign, with slogans like 'stand by your post' and 'don't let your letters into private hands'. What goes around comes around, and now we have the new Tories. We as post office workers have only one option – take on Tony Blair and the Consignia management, by appealing to real people to support us.

In Sheffield, we will defeat the Lynch-mob!

Is it fair to work 41.5 hours and get paid 40? If you think it is, don't bother reading on...

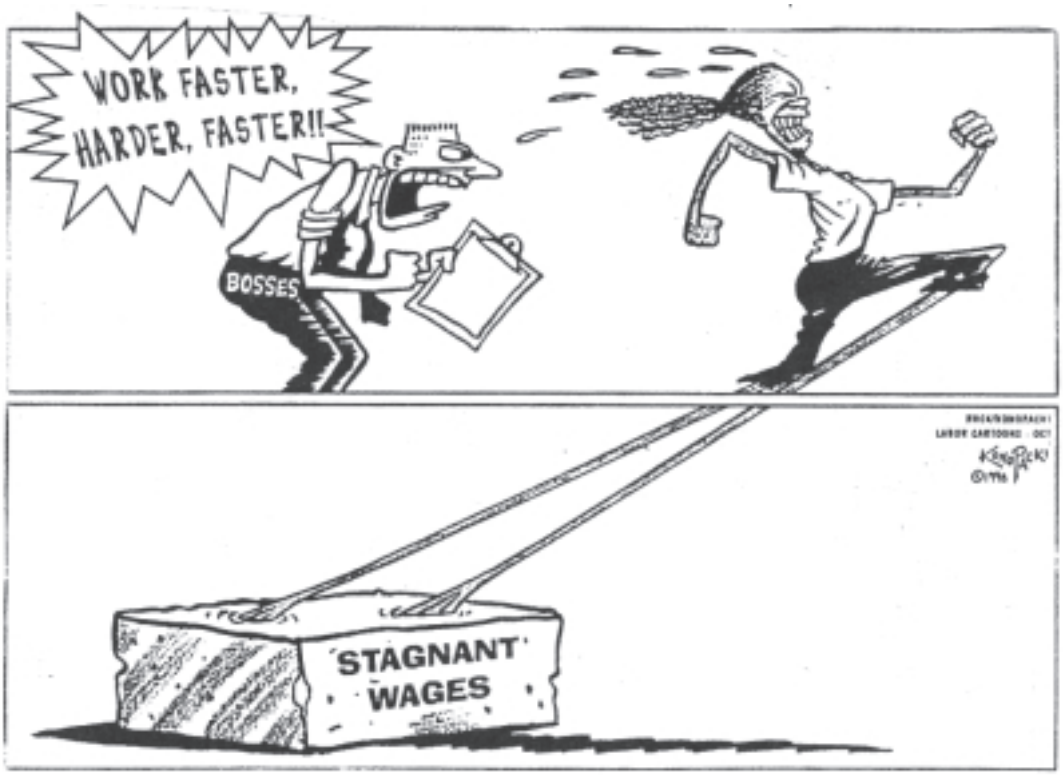
Blame culture's back!

Consignia (the Post Office to normal people) recently wrote to 140,000 postal staff basically threatening dismissal if the industrial unrest continues. The letter blames a handful of staff for fomenting discontent. Who could argue? In a few short months this tiny group of politically motivated individuals have caused strikes right across the country. Unfortunately, the letter was sent to postmen and women, and not to those intent on causing trouble, the management.

Since the election, management or and government tactics have changed. Before, it was "we" want to wave goodbye to the old style of worker against boss and boss against worker. Teamworking was in. Now, reality has re-emerged. The propaganda they are now peddling is the status quo. Blame culture's back.

Tony Blair blames the demonstrators in Genoa, for being brutally attacked by the police. Royal Mail bosses blame wild cat strikes for low profits, after provoking them by keeping 70% of delivery staff and three mail centre's (Birmingham, Oxford and Sheffield) on 41.5 hour weeks and paying them only 40 hours. The big picture is to take sick pay away from thousands of workers. The new tactic is to punch us in the face until we retaliate, then blame us for poor performance caused by bosses incompetence.

The bosses rag 'The Courier' *has been quick to condemn staff for standing up against management bullying. Recently, it trumpeted the joint working party on industrial without noting it would never have happened were it not for workers going on strike. Through our direct action, they have been forced to look at a situation which they are solely responsible. To add insult to injury,* 'The Courier' *also blamed the fall in profits on the workforce. According to the dodgy mathematics of* 'The Courier' *we are earning just seven pounds a week profit per person employed by Royal Mail. Of course, if the parasites with the shiny arses in their suits were removed, this figure would soar as the amount of mail being delivered by the real workers has greatly increased in recent years.*



Unpaid Overtime

Consignia (formerly the Post Office) are cherry picking The Way Forward nationally to try to take advantage of workers locally. They have implemented the bits they want and made a killing. The classic example is that, since May, when the revisions should have been implemented, people have been working to their old 41.5 hour week contracts, but only getting paid for 40 hours – as under the new agreement. There are 3 mail centres in this farcical position – Sheffield, Birmingham and Oxford while, on the deliveries side, 70% of staff nationally are affected the same way.

Many people with memories long enough will be able to cast their minds back to the late 1980's and the last reduction in working hours for postal staff. We were then still working forty three hours a week. Thatcher was still reigning supreme and many people still imagined things would be better under a Labour Government.

One proviso which the then UCW leadership secured was that in the period of time between the one and a half hour reduction being agreed and it's implementation, the time worked would be 'banked' and paid back in the form of time off. This meant many workers having a couple of extra days leave.

Here we are under a Labour Government, with many of us still working forty one and a half hours a week, but being paid for forty. Things can only get better? It's true that we have been promised a forty hour week, just as soon as we can fund it ourselves by working that bit harder in a shorter time. The so-called 'Way Forward' agreement came into force, in May 2000. Since then, many of us have worked over ninety hours for no pay. Over two weeks worked for Royal Mail with not a penny in payment and no chance of getting that time back.

Of course, there are those who enjoy working for nothing. They're the goon squad who insist on starting work even earlier that the official starting time says they have to. The bosses love these people, and this practice, along with using private cars on delivery saves Royal Mail hundreds of thousands of pounds every year. It also costs jobs. If you are one of the goon squad, you have no complaint as you obviously love the job so much.

For the rest of us, we don't see why we should work for nothing. We think the CWU leadership should have had the wit to see through Royal Mail's game and had the intelligence to get an agreement for the hours worked to be paid back to us.

We think the new 'left-wing' General Secretary should be made aware of how we feel and that he should immediately pursue a deal on behalf of those of us still working forty one and a half hours, thereby getting us our time back and applying pressure on Royal Mail to implement forty hour, five day week's as soon as possible.

Why not drop him a line at CWU Headquarters, 150 The Broadway, Wimbledon, London. SW1P 5RQ. Tel. 0208 971 7200.

THIS LEAFLET WAS PRODUCED FOR POSTAL WORKERS BY POSTAL WORKERS

Communication Workers' Network - Solidarity Federation - International Workers' Association

FIGHTING TALK

The election to General Secretary of the Communication Workers Union of one time militant, Billy Hayes, has had the effect of injecting a little fighting spirit into his defeated Blairite opponent, John Keggie.

Keggie, probably hoping to gain a bit of credibility with the rank and file, stated at conference that the CWU would ballot for strike action if any further privatisation took place within Royal Mail. Of course we could ask why Keggie didn't start waving his red flag when Royal Mail sold off the engineering and catering departments? Could it be he thought the General Secretary's job was in the bag once Derek Hodgson retired, and he would be better off keeping quiet rather than rock the New Labour boat? In any event, there being no suitable candidates with the bottle to take on Royal Mail management, Billy Hayes got the top job. The low return of ballot papers perhaps summed up our sense of having to choose between frying pan and fire, with Keggie's fingerprints on the 'Way Forward' knife probably being the deciding factor.

CWU leaders had been quick to distance themselves from the recent waves of so-called unofficial industrial action which has been one manifestation of discontent among the workforce. However Pat O'Hara of the E.C. boldly stated at conference that the CWU would defend unofficial as well as official strike action in future. The proof of the pudding will be in the eating, but this is certainly a new departure for a union which has laid down it's arms at the first whiff of action too often in the past.

Almost certainly this fighting talk has been prompted by the knowledge, recognised by Hayes in his election address, that the membership of the CWU is completely disillusioned with the leadership. The fact is, many people remain in the CWU not because the union will fight for better pay and conditions, but because it offers legal cover in the event of an accident on duty.

The CWU leadership is seen as another layer of management, to be fought against and not to be trusted in making vital decisions regarding working practices. Worse is that we have to pay a weekly sum to keep them in a manner the rest of us will never be accustomed to. To add insult to injury, the CWU insists on throwing huge sums of cash (our cash) into Blair's coffers.

Fighting talk at the conference rostrum in front of the faithful is one thing. Supporting direct action to combat bullying management or to secure better conditions for the rank and file might well be another. It would be foolhardy in the extreme to give any credence to the promises of the E.C. The militancy of the membership might be forming the tune on their lips at the moment, but they will dance with the management when the time comes.

If anything of value is to be achieved which will benefit the workers at all, it will only come when we take matters into our own hands and join a union which is democratically formed from among our own kind. Such unions are growing already in parts of Europe, Australia, and North and South America. These are the anarcho-syndicalist unions with no connection whatsoever with the vested interests of party politics and the state. Solidarity Federation is the British section of the International Workers Association. We are such a union. We believe talk is cheap and that action speaks louder than words. We believe Direct Action speaks loudest of all.

What is more, we will still be here when those on the present E.C. have given up tub thumping and gone back to the high life. Join us and fight back.

FAT CAT BRITAIN

Bosses are fat cats – whether they are bosses of parties, companies, or Unions. Indeed, the CWU Exec did rather well in the last financial year. Keggie got £101,000, Hodgson got £92,000, and so on. The lowest was Tony Rupa who got a mere paupers wage of £65,000. It's the first time we at CWN have had sight of these sorts of figures – despite the fact that it's a legal requirement that the info should be available to members.

TIP FOR THE FUTURE

Currently, negotiations between bosses and union bosses are going on behind closed doors. Our tip at CW is that they will not agree over the new employment contracts and we'll be ballotted for industrial action by the autumn.

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Globalising profits, scandalising wages

Current Labour and management speak is that Royal mail needs to be "in line with the rest of Europe" and "competing on a level playing field". The subtext is that we are all benefiting from Royal Mail's old monopoly position and that we the workers will have to tighten our belts to be competitive. However, "inline with the rest of Europe" does not apparently extend to wages and working conditions. In Europe, a 35 hour week is more the norm. In Royal Mail we are more likely to work 41.5 hours and get paid for 40. We don't want overtime, we want decent basic pay. Not pathetic wage's made up by constant overtime. It has taken ten years to drop three hours off our working week, it doesn't take a mathematician to work out that to be "in line with Europe" could take more than ten years. By this time, at current rates, if we stand back and let these bastards do what they are planning, many of us won't have a job to fight for.

Royal Mail like to play at being a private company, selling off sections, buying in work, and acquiring businesses makes them look good to the government. It also gives them an excuse to give themselves fat bonuses - they like the idea of being fat cats like their counterparts on the Railways.

And here's another thing that is not in line with the rest of Europe - bosses pay. It is now official – British bosses already pay themselves far more than anyone else in Europe, and workers wages are the lowest in the western world. Royal Mail and Tony Blair apparently want it to get worse. Clearly, they do not really want us to be in line with the rest of Europe on wages and working conditions – if only.

Catalyst

Freesheet of the Solidarity Federation - IWA

4th issue:
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Railways - Sidelining the Slogans
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Casual Labour

Since the introduction of the disastrous 'Way Forward Agreement' in May 2000, almost half of all delivery offices have introduced Phase 1 of the revision procedure which is specifically designed to get staff out on delivery by 07.00. It was hoped by the CWU/Royal Mail joint high command that all offices would have these revisions in place by now with Phase 2 waiting to be implemented. Those offices which have fallen victim to Phase 1 are by no means happy with the outcome.

A certain amount of 'pre-prep' or ASAP has done nothing to relieve overloaded deliveries as correctly predicted by the CWN over a year ago. The fact that 50% of delivery offices have not so easily swallowed the CWU/Royal Mail propaganda is causing some annoyance and embarrassment down there at Wimbledon mission control.

Causing particular concern are those members of staff who insist that Saturday is a day best spent with the family, or following traditional Saturday pursuits such as football, or just putting the old feet up with a cup of tea and the paper. (Well, why not? Senior managers and plenty of CWU officials don't work on Saturdays.) It seems these irresponsible individuals are insisting on finishing at the stipulated time and clearing off home. Of course this means not every item of mail is being delivered by those insisting they implement the Royal Mail delivery standard of not delivering past 09.30. The solution? Why, casual labour of course. Never mind that we spent two weeks on the picket line during the summer of 1988 to prevent casualisation. This is the age of partnership and all that's forgotten now. The mail must go out, and CWU/Royal Mail have agreed to casual staff delivering it.

So, each Saturday we see the arrival of young people with no adequate protective clothing against the weather given a short lesson in Health and Safety and sent out to areas of towns which were previously just areas in the local A-Z road map.

Managers can be heard uttering the refrain, "We would sooner our staff delivered the mail and earned the extra overtime". Well, so would we, but since "The Way Forward" abolished double rate for overtime on Saturdays, you are going to have to whistle. CWU/Royal Mail pushed for acceptance of the deal, now they must live with the consequences. Already these consequences include mail being brought back because the casual staff are unwilling to walk around for several hours in pouring rain dressed only in a tracksuit, increased customer concern that their mail is not being delivered by the usual postman/woman and, predictably, mis-delivery complaints.

But again, as pointed out by this bulletin last year, CWU/Royal Mail have no intention of addressing the problem of overloaded deliveries and even the much vaunted Pegasus programme which was being trialed at selected offices has now been stopped as the cost of implementing the 09.30 last letter standard in the trial offices alone is proving too costly. Royal Mail likes to portray itself as a global player these days. We wholeheartedly agree with their assessment. It is right up there along with other sweatshop employers such as Nike, Disney and McDonalds. They are prepared to go to any length rather than spend a few bob on making life more tolerable for the workforce. So, come half past nine on a Saturday, it's off home for me and I'm even less concerned about undelivered mail than the Sector Operations Manager would be, (presuming he's awake yet).

COMMUNICATION WORKER is produced by people in the Communication Workers' Network, a network of communication workers within the Solidarity Federation (www.solfed.org.uk). Write to us with your views, news, articles or to get involved: CWN, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW. Ansaphone; 0161 232 7889. Email; solfed@solfed.org.uk