

Belfast wildcat victory shows the way forward

Bullying and abuse of the disciplinary system by Royal Mail management provoked a walk-out of up to 800 workers in Belfast – the biggest wildcat strike in years. After two weeks, solid on the picket line, Royal Mail was forced to accept most of the strikers' demands.

This victory shows the way forward for postal workers in the Communication Workers Union at a time when Royal Mail is inflicting a vicious programme of job cuts and work changes in Delivery Offices and Mail Centres across Britain.

The strike began in Belfast's Tomb Street depot on 31st January, when 200 workers walked out. A series of incidents, involving heavy handed managers, came to a boil when a worker, who had used a diary to keep a record of management harassment, had it taken off him, photocopied and then was accused of harassment and intimidation himself!

The wildcat strike quickly spread to the West and South Belfast and, by 3rd February, the main sorting office at Mallusk joined in: altogether over 600 were out.

The strike hit Royal Mail where it hurt. Deliveries were halted – North, West and South. No mail left the city, and all post going abroad piled up, unsorted. At one point the Mallusk workers blocked the road, before the cops forced them to back down.

Royal Mail dirty tricks

Royal Mail used every trick in the book.

They refused to negotiate until the strikers went back to work. They spread disinformation - claiming, early on, that the Mallusk centre had gone back to work. Then they tried intimidation, threatening four reps with legal action to make them personally foot the bill for the strike!

As if this wasn't enough, management played the sectarian card, and claimed "sinister" forces lay behind the strike.

None of this put a dent in the magnificent determination of the workers. The strike was solid, and united Catholic and Protestant workers. Their demonstrations deliberately rejected the lies, by marching from the Protestant Shankill Road to the Catholic Falls Road, breaking the infamous dividing line between the two communities. This shows that working class action can break down the poisonous ideas of racism and Orange Unionism, which the bosses push on the working class, through their newspapers and political parties, in order to divide and rule us.

Royal Mail flew in managers from

across Britain to try and get the mail sorted, putting them up in the local Hilton. But they failed to shift the growing mountain of mail, which will take a month to completely clear.

The company was finally forced to back down and concede two of the strikers' main demands: for an independent review of employee relations in Belfast, and for no victimisations of strikers or their officials.

However, Royal Mail is still insisting that the workers give a guarantee on a 12 month no-strike agreement, something that should be rejected outright. The rank and file leadership and workers' unity, forged in the strike, will be needed to ensure the victory is a lasting one.

For a Rank and File movement in the CWU

To overcome the dead hand of the bureaucracy in the CWU - and unfortunately at the helm of all the unions in Britain and the TUC - we need a democratic organisation of the ordinary workers in the post that can spread the news of strikes such as Belfast, organise solidarity to defend it and extend the action. Such an organisation would be based on meetings and conferences open to all members to decide its policies. Its elected leaders, and officials who wanted the organisation's support, would have to fight for its agreed policies, accept a workers wage and agree to be recallable.

This is not pie in the sky or wishful thinking, such movements have existed before, such as the Militant Minority Movement of the 1920's which paved the way for a revival of the unions and militant struggles, leading up to the great General Strike of 1926. The key principle of such a movement is independence from the bureaucracy in control of the union, "with them when they fight for what workers need, without them when they won't". The goal would be to end the bureaucracy



National strike to stop cuts!

The Belfast strikers' complaints reflect a larger trend in Royal Mail. As 2006 approached, the company announced its Short Term Savings plan (STS), a massive 5 per cent cut across the board. Thousands of jobs are to go, the first step in a major restructuring of the workforce to make us "fit" for competition – and ultimately privatisation.

Royal Mail is seeking to downgrade full-time positions to part-time, or even get rid of them. This means a shift to a casualised, part-time delivery staff that will be difficult to unionise - a potentially a fatal blow to the CWU's position of strength in the post.

This is how the Dutch multinational TNT operates in the post in Holland – Royal Mail's declared business model.

Management says it doesn't want compulsory redundancies and it will achieve these cuts through "natural wastage": a recruitment ban, or replacing those who leave with part-timers on as little as 17.5 hours a week.

But in most offices there isn't that high a turnover of staff, so how to speed up the process? Harassment, nitpicking over every detail of procedure, getting people onto the disciplinary system, and then out of a job. The workforce will be chopped down to size, workloads will go up, and union membership figures will go down. The coming challenges - and the struggles needed to meet them by the CWU - dwarf previous threats and changes such as Single Daily Delivery. Our union must rise to the challenge.

CWU Leadership refuses support

Belfast shouldn't have had to take unofficial action. We should already be balloting for a national strike against STS. The wildcat strike could have been a starting point to get such action rolling.

That didn't happen, however. The CWU leadership repudiated the action because it was unofficial, telling workers to get back to work – apparently to avoid being fined by the courts under the anti-trade union laws. The strikers rightly ignored this and stood fast, paving the way for their victory.

But in fact the union leaders have not called any action over Short Term Savings, legal or otherwise. Now that the action has begun without them, they focus on trying to get it to stop. Their priorities are completely the wrong way round.

This is a terrible situation. Up to 30 or so requests for ballots have been reported over STS being implemented in local offices, but the CWU leadership's response so far has been to put out the fires, rather than stoke them up. Only now is postal deputy general secretary Dave Ward talking about a national strike – at some point in the future.

Yet now is the time to strike – and strike decisively – before competitors, like TNT, are fully geared up to run a scab service. The aftermath of the Belfast strike, with its month-high mountain of mail, shows that these companies can't compete yet. There is no time to lose. Now is the time for a national all-out strike to stop the cuts and close the market. Belfast has showed that if we stay out till we win, we are likely to succeed. The members should decide what kind of action we take. The victory in Belfast shows it should be an all-out indefinite strike action.

Fight for jobs

There is a worrying amount of agreement between Royal Mail and the CWU tops. Look at the CWU's January 2006 national briefing to union members, *The Whole Picture*. Like Royal Mail, it said that we need to be realistic. There will be changes due to

for a rank and file movement... and transform the CWU into a democratic, class struggle trade union.

If we don't build such a movement, then every time a wildcat happens it will be isolated, whenever we need a strike we will have to wait till the pressure builds on the leaders before they do anything. Action will be too little, too late, achieving far less than was possible. In the context of the opening of the postal market and grave threat of competition and cuts, leaving the struggle to the initiative at the top alone will prove disastrous.

The union bureaucrats aren't simply "bad", most genuinely want to better the members' lives. But left wing or right, they earn more than their members, and have a comfortable office existence. They don't face the increased workload and daily pressure from managers. When our jobs go, the officials will still have theirs. Their bread and butter is negotiating with bosses and sticking to the law, even if it means an ineffective response to threats like the present cuts, and negotiating away our jobs. Their interests are not the same as the rank and file. That is why the members and reps need our own independent organisation and to get rid of bureaucracy in the unions.

Our immediate goal should be a national strike against the cuts and privatisation. But a rank and file movement needs to have a bigger political strategy too. We should aim to split from labour and support the Campaign for a New Workers Party Conference this month. We should build a working class movement against privatisation with other public sector unions, community organisations, and youth. We should fight for the transformation of the entire sector we work in, nationalising the other private postal operators without compensation and placing the communications sector - post, telecoms, and internet - under the control of the working class, running it for need not profit..

Such a rank and file movement could spearhead a revival of the working class movement in Britain, and help build a revolutionary party that could lead the working class in the struggle for the overthrow of capitalism, and for a new socialist society.

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competition and automated walk sorting. Jobs will be lost, but pay should rise for those who remain.

Our leaders have so far bent the knee, hoping to haggle with Royal Mail over how many workers have to go. This means trading away our long-term interests, and the interests of the working class as a whole – i.e. our neighbours, family, future generations, the youth – trading in full-time unionised jobs for crap call centre posts and jobs at McDonalds.

For a plan of action!

There are two roads forward: the rank and file initiative of the Belfast strikers, or the inaction of the CWU leadership.

In the context of the postal market, competition and cuts, leaving the struggle to the initiative at the top will prove disastrous. We need a rank and file movement to push the struggle forward and control it. Every office balloting for strikes, the Belfast office first and foremost, should immediately call a conference, with reps and delegates from offices and branches, who believe we need militant action to stop STS.

That conference should hammer out a plan of action to fight for in the union, and an emergency motion to this May's conference. It should found a rank and file movement, elect a steering committee, and draft a short statement of its aims and policies.

It should campaign for a national strike under the control of elected strike committees, and demand immediate strike ballots in the 30 offices that have asked for them. That way we can stop Royal Mail's plans in their tracks.

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