

Britain: Socialist Workers Party colludes in postal strike sellout

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Among the 17 members of the executive of the Communication Workers Union of Britain (CWU) who voted unanimously to call off the postal strikes scheduled for November 6 and 9 is union president and Socialist Workers Party (SWP) member Jane Loftus. The SWP has promoted Loftus in its weekly newspaper and presented her as being in the forefront of the postal dispute. It has made no comment on her role in calling off the strikes.

The cancellation of all industrial action on the terms of an interim agreement brokered by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) is a repudiation of the three-to-one mandate the CWU received from the membership in a strike ballot. The CWU leadership opposed a national strike all along, offering Royal Mail management a three-month, no-strike agreement while negotiations continued back in July.

Having been forced to ballot for national strike action, the CWU staggered the strikes of different groups of postal workers to limit the impact of a series of one-day stoppages. The strike action planned for November 6 and 9 that was called off would have been the first time that all 120,000 postal workers took action.

While the CWU and the TUC sought to offer favourable terms to Royal Mail, the firm, with the full support of the Labour government, pressed ahead with the largest strike-breaking exercise since the Thatcher government took on the National Union of Mineworkers in 1984-5—hiring up to 30,000 temporary workers as scabs. By calling off the dispute prior to Christmas, when the postal workers would have enjoyed maximum leverage, the CWU has handed Royal Mail and the Labour government a major victory.

The CWU has pledged itself to enforce a no-strike agreement and even called off its legal action against Royal Mail for its breach of employment law by hiring temporary workers to break the strike.

Contrary to the claims made by CWU Deputy General Secretary Dave Ward, there has not been a climbdown by Royal Mail on any of the substantive questions with regard to pensions, working conditions or victimisation by management. While the interim agreement abounds with

platitudes about valuing employees and job security, it makes clear that Royal Mail management's objectives of achieving greater competitiveness at the expense of the postal workers remains unaltered. The unilateral imposition by management of changes to shift patterns and increased workloads at a local level has not been withdrawn. The interim agreement merely states:

“In all offices where change has been implemented in 2009 the local parties will undertake a review. In offices where change has been implemented without agreement, the local parties will engage in genuine negotiations to reach local agreement.”

There is no unconditional withdrawal of disciplinary charges against postal workers who have been victimised for failing to carry out management dictates. Postal workers were expected to meet the increased workloads without any overtime payment if they worked in excess of their normal working day. If they failed to complete their round, this was deemed “deliberate withholding of the mail,” a sackable offence. Without any guarantee to drop these charges, postal workers could still face such sanction.

The key feature of the agreement is that it paves the way for all these matters to be determined on the basis of local negotiations. This can only serve to undermine the collective strength of postal workers, enabling Royal Mail to pursue a policy of divide and conquer.

The role of the CWU bureaucracy in sabotaging the postal dispute is a clear refutation of the political line of the SWP. The organisation insists that the trade unions remain organisations for the defence of workers' interests. It is prepared to acknowledge that the bureaucracy represents a privileged social stratum, but maintains that it is still forced to uphold the interests of its members.

Prior to the sellout, the October 31 edition of the *Socialist Worker* ran an article asking, “How Do We Fight When Union Leaders Waver?”

It argued that whereas the trade union bureaucracy “balances between the two main classes in capitalist society—the employers and the workers,” and attempts “to

control and hold back workers' struggles," they cannot take this too far, as their position rests on their members. If this is weakened in favour of the bosses, the SWP claimed, then so is the union leaders' standing.

"This means that trade union bureaucrats can do good things. Even right-wing union leaders can be forced to lead strikes to defend their members," *Socialist Worker* declared.

The article maintained that to the extent that rank-and-file action was to be called for, it was with the precondition that it was to support the union bureaucracy, not challenge it.

"The best way to take the struggle forward is to organise workers on a rank-and-file level," *Socialist Worker* wrote. "A strong organisation of this nature could support the officials as long as they were representing the union members, but could act independently the moment their leaders began to look for some way to settle their dispute unfavourably."

But as the experience of postal workers has proven, there is no limit to the treachery of the union leadership. The CWU has paved the way for plans to sack around 45,000 of its members and carry out the partial privatisation of Royal Mail.

Far from occupying a position "between the classes," the CWU and the other unions have been integrated into the structures of corporate management and the state and act as workplace policemen on behalf of the ruling class—a role for which they are paid handsomely. The fact that Royal Mail has for now placed its strikebreaking operations on hold in favour of enlisting the services of the CWU demonstrates precisely how the union functions as an appendage of management and the state.

The SWP and other pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Party, which has still made no comment on the CWU's betrayal, are not an opposition to the bureaucracy, but are part of it—holding positions at all levels of the unions, including national executives.

Loftus is only the latest in a long line of figures who build their careers within middle-class groups and then decide either to quit these groups or maintain their membership, depending on whether they face any criticism for their abject treachery.

Loftus was voted onto the executive of the CWU in 2006. Postal workers had become increasingly disenchanted with a CWU leadership that was openly aligned with the Labour government and its attacks on postal workers in preparation for privatisation. Both CWU General Secretary Billy Hayes and Deputy Secretary Dave Ward owe their positions to this leftward sentiment.

The SWP played a role in providing them both with left credentials. SWP industrial organiser Charlie Kimber called for a vote for Ward in the election he won against John

Keggie in 2003 for deputy secretary, arguing that "We disagree with many of the policies he has defended, in particular the sellout of Romec over privatisation. But a victory for Keggie would be a big step backwards for the union."

The election of Ward et al proved to be no less a setback for postal workers. In 2007, those like Ward employed the left credentials bestowed upon them by the SWP to call off national strike action and impose the Pay and Modernisation Agreement. This inaugurated a major escalation of job losses and established a criterion for pay increases based upon productivity implemented at the local level. Loftus voted against the deal, but refused to mount any public criticism of the executive or campaign to overturn it.

If the SWP was reluctant to make even the most toothless criticism of Ward and Hayes, it can say nothing against them now when their own leading member has participated directly in a major betrayal. Instead it published an article, "Why Post Union Should Not Have Stopped the Strikes," by Yuri Prasad, which has not one word of criticism of the CWU leadership, arguing only that "The positive aspects of the deal—which include a return of normal opportunities to earn overtime, an end to diverting mail away from mail centres that are deemed by the company to be troublesome, and an end to victimisation of union reps—are far outweighed by potential pitfalls."

The purpose of such spin is to avoid saying what is. The sabotage of the strike by the CWU demonstrates that in the trade unions the working class confront organisations that are fundamentally opposed to their essential class interests, headed by a bureaucracy that, together with its counterparts in Labour, is the chief political prop of the ruling elite and the entire profit system. Groups such as the SWP are merely special detachments of that bureaucracy, its apologists and front-line defence against the working class.



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