

Tony Robson addresses SEP (UK) Seventh National Congress on the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees

“The potential in the situation must be acted upon consciously by the cadre, in a deeper turn into the working class”

Tony Robson
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We are publishing the speech given by SEP National Committee member Tony Robson at the Seventh National Congress of the SEP (UK) on the work of the IWA-RFC in the UK.

The section of our Congress resolution on building the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) provides a clear summary of the conceptions which animate this strategic turn by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and the responsibilities of the British section in this critical work.

This is the concrete application to the class struggle of the program of the ICFI, and a recognition of our responsibility to provide leadership to the working class as it is pitched into decisive struggles not only against corporations, but the capitalist system, its governments and the trade union bureaucracy.

As we state in point 44 of the resolution, the founding of the IWA-RFC in 2021 was, “to establish the framework for new forms of independent, democratic and militant rank and file organisation on a world scale”.

In his remarks to the recent Frankfurt Book Fair, David North stated: “If the capitalists are able to organize production on a world scale to make a profit, why shouldn’t the working class be able to organize globally to make the world revolution? The two processes are intimately connected with one another.”

These two sentences are a summary of the revolutionary implications of globalisation made by the ICFI dating back to 1988, which demarcates us entirely from the entire pseudo-left fraternity.

But there is not a shred of fatalism in identifying the profound objective impulses which are underlying this development. The potential in the situation must be acted upon consciously by the cadre, in a deeper turn into the working class as the only social force upon which the fight against social inequality, the attack on democratic rights, social reaction and war can be mounted.

The most recent example of our work in relation to the IWA-RFC is the turn we have made to Stellantis Vauxhall workers and the response we have begun to win.

This work has been developed based on the IWA-RFC statement in October, “After plants closures at VW: For a global rank-and-file campaign against job cuts in the auto Industry”. I also wrote an article which placed the threats to close both the Luton and Ellesmere Port plants within this broader context of its jobs massacre in the US and Europe and those being conducted by the auto companies globally.

The IWA-RFC statement elaborated an international axis of struggle

against the union bureaucracy and its program of corporatism and economic nationalism. It was on this basis we have begun to develop a hearing, and workers have responded.

Teams organised by the London branch at the Luton plant were able to gather very important comments from workers, which we have reported on the WSWs and this has led to a wider circulation of our articles within the plant and on social media.

Workers have responded on two essential issues: first, that opposition to job losses cannot not be conducted on a plant or national basis. Workers know this from historical experience in relation to the closure of the Luton car plant in 2002.

Second, is the visceral anger felt towards Unite the union which is viewed as nothing more than an arm of management. We can see how the WSWs emerges as the trusted voice of workers who are looking for a genuine fight and to reach out beyond national borders in a common struggle to leverage their tremendous social power.

The most recent article we produced on the announcement by Stellantis for the planned closure of the Luton plant thoroughly exposes the hand of the union bureaucracy in pitting the plants off against each other behind the scenes with the company and Labour government.

This underlines what is raised in the Congress resolution on point 44: “The necessary struggle by the rank and file against the nationalist and pro-capitalist trade union bureaucracies in the UK takes on a greater significance under a Labour government. Central to Starmer’s pitch to the ruling class during the general election was his pledge to form an Industrial Strategy Council and deliver “a real partnership between Government, business and unions.”

This is an example of the tripartite alliance in action, between the unions, the Labour government and corporate boardrooms. Among the articles we produced which attracted the most write-ins from Vauxhall workers, was our exposure of Unite’s general secretary Sharon Graham. For more than a month the union maintained a guilty silence over the threats made against both plants. This radio silence was only broken in response to reports posted on the WSWs about the discussions we were holding with Vauxhall workers in relation to the IWA-RFC and anger towards the union bureaucracy.

The press release from Graham was labelled a “warning shot” to Stellantis. She claimed that if the company threatened either plant, the union guaranteed its full backing for collective action. Graham told workers to leave it to Unite and its negotiations with the Labour

government, Stellantis and other auto companies over concessions on the zero emissions mandate.

The warnings we made exposing this total fraud have been rapidly confirmed and this will further register with Vauxhall workers. This has broader implications. As comrades know we have been waging a constant exposure of Graham against the pseudo-left who have promoted her as a reform wing of the bureaucracy.

Graham's histrionics, the empty threats to withdraw union funding to the Labour Party, and her declarations that Unite is doing what it says on the "trade union tin" will not survive the corporatist and nationalist agenda it shares with the Starmer government.

The issue is how we bring forward the constituency within the working class that is looking for a means a fight. The fight to build a rank-and-file committee as a centre of opposition to the bureaucracy means clarifying workers that they do not face a trade union struggle.

We formulate demands which workers recognise must be fought for as non-negotiable. These are imbued with a perspective which connects the defensive struggles on jobs and conditions with the issue of workers control and a socialist reorganisation of society.

The rational use of technology such as AI, EV production and automation depends on which class is in control and whose economic and social interests it serves, which raises the need for an independent political movement of the working class. We are fighting to win workers to a definite perspective. As the Congress resolution explains, generations of the working class have been cut off from its traditions of struggle and a socialist culture.

The IWA-RFC statement on the transition to EV in the auto industry has emphasised that the attack on jobs by the US and European producers for market domination against their rivals in China is bound up with the drive to war. The international unity of the working class must be developed in struggle against both these retrograde processes.

I would like to review some key points on the lessons of the work of the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee. Since its founding in April last year, this has developed as an integral part of the IWA-RFC.

The Congress resolution on point 47 provides an overview of the PWRFC's formation and development, showing the potential for this work to be expanded more broadly in the working class by the party.

The initiative gained traction through the party's intervention into the strike wave in 2023-24. This was an explosive development of the class struggle in Britain, part of a global upsurge. It was a strike wave demobilised and betrayed by the union bureaucracy to smooth the transition to a Labour government committed to austerity and war.

The level of sabotage by the union bureaucracy found naked expression in the actions of the Communication Workers Union (CWU) bureaucracy led by Dave Ward, to suppress strike action by over 100,000 postal workers at Royal Mail. This was not simply a fight on pay but against the imposition of Amazon style terms and conditions. Around 400 union reps and workers were sacked or suspended, in the largest industrial frame-up since the 1984-85 miners' strike.

The corporatist mechanism used to suppress the strike was the arbitration talks at ACAS, sponsored by leading figures within the Labour Party, which served as a de facto injunction against strike action. It was used by Ward and the CWU bureaucracy to veto a renewed strike mandate in February of 96 percent, after 18 days of national strike action. Key players in this conspiracy were former Trades Union Congress General Secretary Brendan Barber and Labour's Lord Falconer.

The direct precursor to establishing the rank-and-file committee was around 100 write-ins we received from postal workers in response to WSWs articles exposing the ACAS talks as a state conspiracy against workers to hatch out a sellout deal.

Our line was finding a receptive audience under conditions of an information black-out by the CWU. The testimonials we published on

WSWS from postal workers revealed conditions on the ground and how the CWU was colluding with increased workloads and a wrecking operation against the mail service through cost-cutting revisions.

In March, we decided to issue a statement calling for an online meeting to establish a rank-and-file committee. This was before the CWU's pro-company agreement was announced in mid-April following ACAS talks.

The committee's inaugural meeting on April 2, featured speakers from France, Germany and Australia. The Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee was formed and adopted a resolution to affiliate to the IWA-RFC. It stated:

"This meeting supports the formation of a rank-and-file committee of postal workers. The aim of the committee will be to mobilise workers against Royal Mail's attacks and lead a fight for an inflation-busting pay rise, a defence of terms and conditions, an end to all job cuts and the overturning of victimisations.

We understand that this fight can only be waged in opposition to the Communication Workers Union leadership and apparatus, which is acting as Royal Mail's partner.

This is the common experience of workers in all industries all over the world, whose unions act as an industrial police force for management."

As the Congress resolution explains there was an outpouring of opposition by postal workers to reject what they denounced as the CWU "surrender document". The Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee played the most active and conscious role in this fight. If comrades recall, its statement and WSWs articles opposing the sellout deal were posted by Royal Mail workers on the CWU twitter page. The red baiting response by the bureaucracy denouncing us as "a crackpot organisation not even based in the UK" was met with a push back from dozens of postal workers.

As one postal worker commented "the only crackpots on here are running the union on behalf of Royal Mail instead of trying to look after the members."

The pseudo-left was forced to conduct a rearguard action against our developing influence. Andy Young, a CWU rep from Workers Power, attended on of our early online meetings to argue that the PWRFC had no right to exist, that a rank-and-file committee was "too premature" and that a No vote against the sellout deal would only be effective if had backing from officials on the CWU Postal Executive.

His "Postal Workers Say Vote No" campaign was aimed at siphoning off opposition toward the bureaucracy with claims that a No vote would pressure Ward to wage a fight. His Facebook page still exists, but Young has become a defunct figure.

Faced with an incipient rebellion against their pro-company agreement, CWU officials resorted to bureaucratic methods between April and June to delay the ballot and bleed out opposition, before ramming through a yes vote in July. Ward stood before workers as the gate keeper of the major shareholders and their profits, threatening workers that a rejection of the sell-out deal would bankrupt the company. The CWU agreement spelled out the union bureaucracy's full integration into management based on its enforcement of sweatshop conditions.

The rank-and-file committee's influence was consolidated by drawing the lessons of this betrayal. As comrades know, we have established a wide audience for our articles and polemics on WSWs, including open letters and statements by the PWRFC. These have included calls for job actions against the Gaza genocide and for the release of comrade Bogdan against NATO's proxy war in Ukraine.

The video interview we recently conducted with victimised delivery worker Des Beach had something of a pioneering character. This testifies to the authority we have established. Des indicted the CWU bureaucracy for their complicity in his frame-up by management. The video has received over 5,000 views. We linked his case to our ongoing exposure of the CWU-backed Falconer Review that oversaw a second frame-up of hundreds of workers who were sacked or suspended during the national

dispute.

The PWRFC's work has proceeded in closest collaboration with the development of rank-and-file committees internationally. I have spoken at meetings in Germany and the US, and we have had speakers at our meetings, particularly Tom Hall from the US, and recently from the rank-and-file committee at Canada Post. This is empowering postal workers to develop a common international strategy against the brutal restructuring of the highly integrated global logistics and mail sector.

Among committee members, there is ongoing discussion about WSWS articles on a range of political and historical issues. Members of the PWRFC have attended online meetings of the Boeing Rank-and-File Committee in the US, and recent webinars on the Trump election victory and the explosive global implications of his fascist presidency. As we have emphasised, recruitment into the party is based on the building of a socialist leadership in the working class capable of leading mass struggles.

With Royal Mail's takeover by billionaire Daniel Kretinsky, all the issues over the destruction of jobs, gig economy conditions, and a two-tier workforce—and the CWU's role in enforcing this—are being reignited.

It required an incoming Labour government to implement a new stage of attacks on behalf of the corporate oligarchy. Labour initiated secret talks with the CWU and Kretinsky back in June, arranging a seamless handover from the Tories.

We have held several online meetings since June to mobilise postal workers against this conspiracy. We have responded in a timely fashion.

Our article, "Communication Workers Union embraces Kretinsky takeover", received over 5,000 views, and many of our articles receive far larger readership. We will be deepening this work in the coming months.

The fight waged by the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee has enabled workers to draw far ranging conclusions in opposition to the corporatism and economic nationalism of the union bureaucracy, demonstrating the need for a socialist perspective.

The work we have conducted at Royal Mail needs to be expanded through the development of rank-and-file committees among other strategic sections of the working class. In the NHS, on the rail and London Underground, in education and the universities, we have established a very strong record which provides the basis for such a development.

The Labour government is a creature of the oligarchy based on austerity, social reaction and war, as the Congress resolution makes clear. In the face of rising social inequality, it faces an explosion. This places a premium on the fight to build the IWA-RFC against the corporatist relations of the unions with the Labour government. It is a major lever in developing an independent political movement of the working class globally against capitalism, inequality and war.



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