

Industrial Notes

Anarchist Communist Federation

1996

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Postal strike

AFTER MORE THAN 2 years of wildcat strikes throughout the postal service in Britain, the postal workers union, the CWU, was forced to call a ballot for strike action. In 1993 there were 32 major work stoppages-this does not include the many actions that lasted less than a day- and in 1994 there were 65. This number increased in 1995 to 88. Through this guerrilla war, and certainly not due to the resistance of the CWU, Royal Mail's attempts to increase exploitation through extra workloads, speedups and job cuts have been seriously checked.

The CWU has consistently denounced the unofficial actions. Now it needs to call a series of strikes under the control of the union in order to "let off steam". In the second place it wants to use the strike to show the bosses that it is needed to police the postal workers. At the CWU National Conference in early June union leaders and many delegates spoke repeatedly about voting in a Labour government. The joint general secretary Tony Young emphasised that the CWU must keep in line with Labour and that some of the laws passed by the Tories against workplace militancy must be retained under a Labour government. He was echoed by his partner as general secretary, Alan Johnson. A motion to commit the union to backing Labour's plan for a commission with the bosses to decide a minimum wage was carried. The Labour shadow foreign secretary Robin Cook made an appearance at conference, as did fellow shadow cabinet member Margaret Beckett. Both Beckett and Cook are the soft cops of New Labour. They aim to portray themselves as the real heart of Labour. Cook is beginning to specialise in these appearances. At the Scottish TUC conference in April he reaffirmed that Labour's links with the unions were unbreakable. Despite what the national newspapers say, Cook is not a leader of the Left (as the Daily Mail described him) but works in tandem with Blair. Whilst Blair is off pleasing the CBI and newspaper tycoons, Cook's job is to keep the unions sweet and make sure that Labour retain the union vote and union support.

Johnson and Young are important allies of Blair. They will attempt to defuse the struggle and call off any action carried out by postal workers. The Labour leadership is putting massive pressure on the CWU executive to sabotage the strike action. At the CWU conference Johnson made reference on a number of occasions to the "British public" and "public opinion". He is seriously worried by the mood of militancy among postal workers. Already an unofficial conference of 150 activists in March in London has met with condemnation by the CWU. In a continuation of the wildcats, 60 workers at Gateshead Team Valley sorting office walked out after management refused to stick by an agreement on overtime and using temporary workers a week before the first official strike. They did this without a ballot and were soon joined by another 500 workers. The bosses went to the courts to declare the strike illegal and the CWU denounced the strike. 50 workers at Willesden walked out briefly on June 20 over the same issues. At the beginning of June, posties officially struck in Wakefield and Harrogate over the victimisation of a worker who had refused to carry out bosses' instructions.

Over the last 10 years the CWU has directly collaborated with Royal Mail bosses by agreeing to Sunday working and a continuing erosion of work conditions for postal workers. Indeed thanks to the CWU productivity — read more efficient exploitation of the workforce — has increased by more than 60%. During the strikes, continuing CWU sabotage continued when it issued a circular telling postal workers not involved in the strike ballot to cross picket lines. This involved mainly part-time casuals, although some full-time workers scabbed as well. The CWU told those posties who had begun their shifts before the start of the strike at midnight to continue working to the

end of their shift. The official union strike leaflet handed out said that the postal workers “didn’t want to be out on strike”!

What is directly at stake is the rejection of the Employee Agenda proposed by the Royal Mail bosses. This proposes the introduction of Team Quality Management which would introduce ‘team working’ through ‘team talks, action plans and personal development modules’. Teams would have to agree to improve efficiency and performance and cover for other workers off sick or on holiday. Local and national agreements would be scrapped so that workers would get a cut in pay! This despite profits this year for Royal Mail of £500m and the productivity increases already mentioned. But now the Royal Mail has to compete with national and international rivals, who already have these methods of working.

Behind all of this is the Conservative Government which is talking about suspending the Royal Mail’s monopoly of mail delivery so that the private outfits can strike-break. The Government also wants to hand the delivery of junk mail over to private companies or separate it off into a Public Limited Company within the Royal Mail. This is in line with the European Union plan for privatisation of all direct mail throughout the EU. This would mean the end of national first and second class stamps, with zone charges so that it would cost more to deliver from London to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland and between the regions of England.

Postal workers will not only have to fight the Royal Mail bosses, they will have to fight the Government and all of its forces, as well as the schemes of the EU. They will have to start increasing contacts and creating coordinations between postal workers on an Europe-wide scale. They will have to combat the private companies. Labour has condemned any actions and through its allies in the CWU will do its utmost to destroy postal workers militant action and organisation. The struggle that the postal workers are facing is one that must go against the union and the State. They deserve total support from throughout the working class.

Tube Workers

A number of one-day strikes has taken place over this summer on the London Underground starting out with train drivers who are members of the rail union ASLEF. There is simmering discontent among Tube workers and the union has attempted to head off strike action by calling a number of ballots over the last few years, which were then cancelled. Last year a massive strike vote was ignored and a dirty deal stitched up between ASLEF and the bosses. This ploy has exasperated Tube workers. For the same reasons as the CWU, to head off pressure from workers and to show that ASLEF has some clout and is worth the employers’ while negotiating with, ASLEF has now called a number of actions for a reduction in the working week. The Tube bosses are attempting to renege on a one hour reduction agreed last year. Meanwhile the other rail union on the tube, the RMT, has-surprise, surprise! failed to call out train driver members at the same time as the ASLEF actions. Under pressure from workers, a combined strike has taken place as we go to press. The RMT has been equivocal to say the least in whether it will instruct its members to cross ASLEF picket lines. The message given by assistant general secretary Bob Crow and executive council member Pat Sikorski (Both members of Scargill’s Socialist Labour Party, and the latter a closet Trot, member of the Fourth International Supporters Caucus, operating inside the SLP as Scargill’s heavies) was ambivalent on this question when they addressed RMT members in the first week of June. Both RMT and ASLEF have continually sabotaged strike

ballots, and collaborated in introducing the bosses plans for getting the tube ready for privatisation which they began introducing in 1991. Both Crow and Sikorski have acted as saboteurs of militant action in the past. In the late 80s they were active on the Shepherd Pie rank and file committee which attempted to force unofficial actions into a trade union straitjacket. They then became important RMT officials, and as such helped in the sabotage of the 1992 strike (It's no surprise that they are part of the leadership of the SLP-this party represents the interests of the "left" union bureaucrats). Tube workers have to ignore all union affiliations, and come together in coordinations, going out to make contact and get support and solidarity action from other workers, in particular other London transport workers like the bus workers and BR workers, who are as much under attack as they are. Bus drivers throughout London have been involved in strike actions over the last year, the most recent being 3 days of strikes in South East London, in the Plumstead, Catford and Bromley garages bossed by Selkent. The third strike was bolstered by 60 maintenance and cleaning staff starting a work to rule. However, the union the TGWU, quickly moved to defuse the action through a ballot. The strikes were against conditions and pay for new starters with 48 hours a week behind the wheel, no sick pay, £% an hour, 13 hour spreadovers, and no bonuses like spreadover payments. The union officials said that new starters were no concern of the workers and they should only think about their own pay packet. New drivers knew what they were accepting! So no the TGWU has sabotaged the actions and given a thumbs-up to a two-tier system, which will pit worker against worker. The Union divides us workers! We must organise outside and against it!

Fire Fighters

Like the post and the tube and buses, the fire brigades have had a history of militant action over the last 2 years. On Merseyside, firefighters threatened to strike in early June when a worker was threatened with the sack for refusing to attend a course, which was used as a pretext to change shifts by the fire bosses at Croxteth. The bosses were forced to back down In Derbyshire 800 firefighters struck twice for 9 hours against cuts planned by the Labour council. The Council responded by trying to get an injunction out under the anti-union laws brought in by the Conservatives. This failed, and the Council ended up with a bill for £40,000 costs paid out of council tax! Now the Council is using Army Green Goddesses and RAF rescue vehicles as we go to press. Tony Benn, so called Left Labour MP for the area, has argued against the strike action, which he said would damage workers and the Council. The Council hopes that firefighters from neighbouring regions will scab. Manchester and Nottinghamshire firefighters made it clear that they would refuse to do this.

In Essex the firefighters union the FBU sabotaged strike action after a massive vote in favour against cuts imposed by the council. The FBU accepted cuts of £700,000 after the Council revised its original cuts package of £1.3 million. The strikes were to coincide with the June 10 actions of the Derbyshire workers. Again the FBU has okayed wage cuts, station closures, speed-ups, part-time working replacing full-time working. Again the message is clear-firefighters must organise outside and against the unions, against the Armed forces strike breakers and the Tory and Labour central and local authorities.

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