

Postal workers to strike again

CWU postal workers will strike again this month (September) in their dispute with Royal Mail over pay and over the bosses' drive to transform the industry radically, with large job cuts, on free-market lines. The strike action follows talks which ended without agreement on Sunday 9 September. As we go to press strike dates have not yet been announced but are set to be before the end of September.

In the talks the union was offered a better deal on pay — a number of options amount to 6.7% on basic pay over two years with additional lump sums. This includes more money in the first year. However the pay was in return for a raft of strings on flexibility, pensions and

changes to duties, voluntary redundancy and industrial relations agreements.

CWU branch reps will meet on Thursday 13 September to discuss the outcome of the talks so far.

Pete Keenlyside from the postal executive of the CWU spoke to *Solidarity* about the current state of play.

"There are two possible assessments: either Royal Mail don't want an agreement and want to push on with their modernisation programme or they realise there is going to have to make an agreement and are putting everything on the table that they want in a final deal. I'm not sure which assessment is right but either way we will have to restart the industrial

action to get them to shift from here. All things being equal we will need to take industrial action. We now have to re-focus on what we want, we need to be clearer on what we want. The political element of the campaign needs to be there. The government still wants "modernisation" (i.e. cuts) in the Post Office.

"We can't tell what is going to happen with the other unions. The government may pick and chose who it deals with. It may do a deal with Unison and leave the PCS and us hanging out to dry. But I remain optimistic."

Trade union activists need to get ready for more solidarity work, including setting up postal worker support groups or local public sector solidarity committees.



Local government Strike call blocked?

BY MIKE FENWICK

AS we go to press, it looks like top Unison officials will head off the call by the union's local government negotiating committee (NJC) to ballot for strike action against the employers' 2.475% pay offer (a cut in real terms).

On 12 September the Unison Northern Region local government committee met, and was strong-armed into opposing the strike ballot. Unison local government Executive member Margaret Clayton claimed that other regions also opposed the strike ballot.

A 100-strong meeting on the same day of Tower Hamlets Unison voted unanimously for no delay with the strike ballot, but such rank-and-file voices are unlikely to be heard when the Unison local government Exec meets. It looks as if the Exec will insist on a "consultative ballot" of Unison local government members on the offer before considering any action.

The GMB has already taken the same line.

The local government employers had upped their pay offer somewhat. Their deal would give a 3.4% pay rise to the poorest paid council workers and 2.475% for all others. It's still a pay cut, though it is the first major public sector deal to break the 2% limit.

Because Brown has been saying there will be no exceptions to 2% — and for years to come, too — the employers have had to justify their offer by saying local government workers have increased efficiency over the last few years more quickly than other public sector workers. Is this a backdoor productivity deal?

In the health service a worse pay deal, stuck at less than 2%, is being offered.

Unison in health is currently balloting on that deal. The ballot closes on 13 September. The Unison leadership has gone as near as it dares to positively recommending the offer, say it is "the best that can be got through negotiations." Yet now would be the best time to co-ordinate action across the sectors, bringing the full weight of the union into play. A simple slogan of "one union, one fight" would pull together the member's common interest in securing a wage rise above the rate of inflation.

There have been a series of efforts by the full time officers in the health sector to silence a campaign to reject the offer in the ballot. When individual members and branches tried to organise for a no vote, the response was a rapid clampdown from the bureaucracy with threats of disciplinary action. The fact that Karen Jennings, Unison's head of health, is now to be a New Labour election candidate has further incensed rank and file activists. Rightly, members are asking if there is a conflict of interest between serving UNISON members' interests and serving Brown.

The rulings made to stop the no campaign are being challenged, and we await the results.

Not all the leadership are loyal minions of New Labour though. Others are genuinely cautious about the ability of the union to organise national industrial action in the NHS. Unison has never done this and sectional national action such as the NHS Logistics action has failed despite the tenacity of the workers involved.

This underlines the case for having an open debate in the union to discuss which forms of industrial action are both possible and would be effective. But the attempt to enforce silence has limited the opportunity for activists to start preparing members for the battles to come.

The RCN are meeting again on the 15th and at a special conference will be discussing taking action on pay, probably initially in the form of work to rule. The AMICUS section of UNITE have already decided to accept the deal, although action elsewhere could see that decision reversed.

Unity is a problem while the leadership tries to block local branch based initiatives, as in Leeds, to develop Public Sector Alliances. Unison General Secretary Dave Prentis has said that unity and joint action is the proper business only of himself and the other general secretaries, discouraging local initiatives with threatening letters. When it means blocking a forum for meeting others in the same union, only in different sectors, it seems even more ridiculous.

United action on pay, in health and in local government, would mean the birth of Unison as a true industrial union, for the first time taking on the role of coordinating campaigns and action across the public sector. That was the purpose for which it was formed and now is the chance to make it reality:

- one union, one struggle,
- no pay cuts across the public sector,
- for joint and coordinated strike action in Unison and beyond to end Brown's pay freeze.

New website for public sector pay battle

<http://www.unionsfightback.org.uk> collects news, background information, and downloadable bulletins about the public sector pay battle. Check it out! And contribute!

Learn from the prison officers!

BY COLIN FOSTER

WHAT is the government going to do with illegally striking prison officers? Send them all to jail?

The strike on 29 August by prison officers showed up the union leaders who have been dithering and "consulting" and making calculatedly vague threats of future action for months about Brown's imposed cut in real wages.

The strike was doubly illegal. The Tory government in 1994 made all strikes by prison officers illegal. And anyway, under the general Tory anti-union laws, continued by Blair and Brown, any strike is illegal unless the bosses are given seven days' notice.

The government quickly got a court injunction against the action, but also agreed to talks which it had earlier refused. The Prison Officers' Association says it may take further action if the talks are unsatisfactory.

The lawyer Marcel Berlins commented tellingly in the *Guardian* (3 September):

"The prison officers' disregard of the court injunction against them was short-lived and partly cosmetic, done for publicity rather than strategic purposes. It was clear that the strikers would return to work. Nevertheless the act of mass disobedience should not be seen as irrelevant."

The fact is that a high court judge ordered the cessation of a clearly unlawful industrial action, and thousands of the strikers, including their leaders, took no notice.

But what if the situation had been more serious? What would have happened had thousands of strikers defied the court indefinitely? In such circumstances, is an injunction toothless? The strike leaders could be fined or even imprisoned for contempt of court.

But such measures would only increase bitterness, make a settlement less likely and cause chaos in the prisons, possibly endanger-

ing public safety. The law would, in practice, be powerless".

What he writes applies to any moderately strategic group of workers, not just prison officers. Given working-class solidarity, the anti-union laws are "powerless".

The rank and file in every union should press that message on their leadership; and all trade unionists should support the right to strike for prison officers — and for police, who have been banned from striking or unionising since police strikes in 1918 and 1919 left the bourgeoisie in holy fear of Bolshevik revolution.

Prison officers are an anomalous group of workers. Socialists might not support their economic demands in the same automatic way as we do other workers. But we support their democratic rights.

And in this case the prison officers are fighting the same 2% pay limit that hits all public sector workers. They're doing it in conditions exacerbated by the policy, from successive Tory and Labour governments, of "dealing with" the social problems caused by an increasingly unequal and insecure society by stuffing prisons to overcapacity.

The *Guardian* of 30 August quotes a Leeds prison officer, Kirk Robinson: "When I started here we were locking up criminals. Now it's mostly people with a drug habit or psychiatric disorders. I'd guess 80%".

On official figures, 72% of prisoners have mental illnesses, 48% are illiterate, and only 30% have "basic skills" of literacy and numeracy. Stuffing them into prisons only worsens their social marginalisation.

Health service workers strung out by Blair and Brown's privatisation policies in the NHS, civil service workers afflicted by job cuts, and teachers suffering from the school-league-tables frenzy, would do best to follow the prison officers' example in refusing to be cowed.

PCS to "consult" yet again

IF looks could kill... If "consultations" could crush, then civil service workers would already have gained a levelling-up of pay to across-the-service decent rates, and stopped the Government's drastic job cuts.

After "consulting" its members at length over the summer about its barely-started campaign on jobs and pay, the civil service union PCS has announced that: "Feedback from the consultation meetings was that members clearly accept the need for further national action to resolve the dispute, alongside other unions if possible".

So the PCS will call action? Alongside the postal workers, due to strike again this month? Not so fast! First it will "consult" yet again. PCS announces:

"The union has a legal mandate for industrial action following the national statutory ballot in January... [but] the National Executive Committee has decided that members should be consulted again through a national indicative ballot".

PCS members in the Department of Work and Pensions (job centres and similar: one of the PCS's largest sections) have voted to reject their pay offer, but it is not yet clear what the union will do about it. The union's official announcement is:

"Members... working for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) have overwhelmingly rejected a below inflation pay offer... 76% of those voting rejected the three year pay deal which sees cost of living increases for longer serving staff members of 2% this year, 0% next year and 1% in the final year". The vote was 26,935 to reject the deal, and 8,635 to accept, on a 43% turnout.

The repeated hesitation at the top means that there is something of a "wait and see" feeling in the rank and file. But the DWP vote suggests that the ranks of the PCS would mobilise in strength given a serious lead for a sustained fight on jobs and pay, not just scattered token actions.