



postalworker

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Fight to abolish all anti-union laws!

Vote Labour!



On 12 December, we'll have the chance to kick the Tories out of government.

We face a binary choice; a class choice: vote for a government of the rich, by the rich, for the rich, or vote for a government of a party linked to trade unions, with policies committed to clawing back some of the vast wealth currently held by the rich and big business and using it to fund public services and improve working-class people's lives.

Labour is also committed to renationalising Royal Mail, and part-nationalising BT Openreach to ensure free broadband for all, two key CWU policies. It has also committed to reducing the working week to 32 hours across the economy by 2029, another key demand in the current dispute. It is also committed to repealing anti-union laws.

There is an ongoing debate in the Labour Party and wider labour movement about some key issues, including Brexit. We believe that the key trade union principles of international solidarity should compel our movement to oppose Brexit. If Britain leaves the EU, it will increase divisions between workers on the basis of nationality and immigration status. Ending free movement means migrant workers will be reliant on visas and sponsorship from employers to remain in the country, making them less confident to stand up for the rights at work. Free movement for all means that bosses can't use immigration status to divide workers.

Labour for a Socialist Europe and the Labour Campaign for Free Movement are active within the Labour Party election effort to argue for a politics of international solidarity and class struggle, within Britain and across Europe.

• For more, see labourforasocialisteurope.org and labourfreemovement.org

The High Court injunction granted to Royal Mail to prevent postal workers from striking, despite their overwhelming vote to do so, highlights the profoundly undemocratic nature of Britain's anti-trade union laws, and the urgent need for the whole labour movement to renew our fight for their abolition – including by demanding that the Labour Party commits to fully repealing all existing anti-union laws when in government.

Part of Royal Mail's claim to the High Court was that the CWU's extensive, and highly effective, social media campaign to encourage members to vote yes in its ballot for industrial action breached laws which requires that members be able to vote in ballots without "interference" from the union. The judge claimed that the CWU's campaign amounted to a "de facto workplace ballot" – but why should workplace ballots be illegal? Workers voting, in the workplace, to withdraw their labour, should be a legally enshrined democratic right.

Workplace ballots for strikes have been illegal since the early 90s, and the law has required that ballots take place without "interference" from the union since the 1984 Trade Union Act.

The 1984 Act was one of a succession of anti-union laws imposed by the Thatcher and Major governments in the wake of capital's major victories over organised labour in the 1980s, most prominently in the 1984/5 miners' strike, which sought to criminalise effective workplace organisation and industrial action, and weight the scales of power dramatically towards employers.

Even when unions clear the arbitrary thresholds demanded by the 2016 Trade Union Act, as the CWU comfortably did in its recent ballot, the pre-existing legislation hands bosses an invaluable weapon to challenge the validity of any ballot. The law requires that unions submit balloting information to employers in advance of commencing any ballot, giving bosses time to scrutinise it for any



minor inaccuracies or technicalities with which they can run to the judges.

The Royal Mail injunction must be met with a storm of protest across the labour movement, and any members of the CWU who choose to take unofficial action must be supported by their own union and the movement as a whole.

The power that existing laws give employers to obstruct industrial action should settle the debate ongoing within the labour movement about what attitude a future Labour government should take to the laws. Some have argued that a "public bonfire of the Thatcherite anti-union laws" is not required, and that Labour could supersede them by passing new, positive legislation. Despite overwhelming votes at three consecutive Labour Party conferences for policies demanding the repeal of all anti-union laws, Labour's leaders rarely publicly commit to more than the repeal of the most recent, the 2016 Trade Union Act. The reality is that, even if the 2016 Act were repealed, and even if a Labour government passed positive legislation giving unions more right, unless the laws passed between 1980 and 1990 were also repealed, the legislation that gives bosses the ability to seek High Court injunctions against strikes would remain in effect.

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Abolish all anti-union laws!

(Continued from front)

The idea that the only prior mechanism necessary to sanction a strike should be a majority vote of the workers involved in a workplace meeting only appears radical because we toil under the weight of generations of defeat – prior to which, these more direct and immediate forms of workplace democracy were the norm.

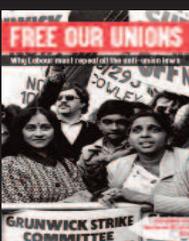
The CWU, with its practise of large “gate meetings” at sorting offices and depots and its members’ retention of a culture of wildcat and unofficial action, which the union admirably refuses to disavow, has fared perhaps the best of all TUC-affiliated unions in retaining some of the culture that the Tories sought to smash and then shackle and repress with laws designed to definitively prevent its reemergence. Its present conflict with Royal Mail on this terrain, therefore, takes on a political significance well beyond the bounds of a simple trade dispute between an employer and a particular union. As fellow trade unionists, we would do Royal Mail workers a serious disservice if we allowed any policy other than the abolition of all anti-union laws to become dominant in either the industrial or political wings of the labour movement.

Committing to the full abolition of all anti-union laws, and their replacement with a positive bill of rights legislating for a full right to strike, is not only an important and symbolic statement of political intent, it is an absolutely essential plank of the policy platform of any government which seeks, in John McDonnell’s words, to achieve “an irreversible shift in wealth and power in favour of working people”.

Without such a policy, the balance of power in workplaces will remain tilted massively in favour of employers, with workers and our unions forced to fight with at least one hand tied behind our backs.

The Free Our Unions campaign fights for the abolition of all anti-trade union laws, and their replacement with a positive right to strike. The campaign is backed by three

national unions, FBU, RMT, and IWGB, and dozens of branches and regions, including CWU Greater London Combined. To find out more about the campaign, visit bit.ly/FreeOurUnions



Keep gate meetings going: Build rank-and-file democracy



A key aim of rank-and-file - i.e., grassroots, democratic - trade unionism is to minimise the distance between the union’s decision-making structures and the workplace.

The CWU’s practise of gate meetings is an excellent one that must be maintained and extended. Mass assemblies at the workplace itself give workers a chance to discuss their conditions and deliberate on the way forward, in the context of the collective solidarity of their workmates.

Gate meetings need to be more than just an opportunity to hear reports from reps and officials; they can also be a means for rank-and-file postal workers to exercise democratic control over the direction of the dispute.

Although gate meetings can not and should not supplant or bypass the formal democracy of the CWU, via branch and divisional structures, reps and activists can find ways to ensure the discussions had there and any consens reached are fed directly into those formal structures.

A rank-and-file perspective doesn’t mean condemning all union leaders and officials as sell-outs, or sell-outs in waiting, or expecting that our leaders will stitch us up. The vibrant and energetic campaign to get the vote out in the recent ballot, and the resolve that the leadership has shown to stand up to Royal Mail, have been impressive. But within any union, even the most democratic, there is always some inbuilt tension between the rank and file, the grassroots membership of the union in workplaces, and what socialists call “the bureaucracy”, the union officialdom for whom the union is primarily a set of structures, financial considerations, and, on an individual level, a career, rather than an instrument of struggle. Independent rank-and-file organisation, that seeks to weight the balance of power in the union towards the rank and

file and away from the bureaucracy, is needed to ensure the union is effective as a tool in its members’ hands for the purpose of improving their lives at work.

Continuing the gate meetings, and taking the energy of those mass assemblies into the formal structures of the union, can be the foundations for that rank-and-file independence.

Voices from the workplace

It’s good the union is appealing the injunction.

It was an unfair decision, especially when the judgement mentioned the election and the strike action was proposed before the election was.

There is general disappointment in the workplace, with many people working to rule in response. Gate meetings are due to take place across the country to continue discussions and get updates face to face.

If we don’t win the appeal, I feel like we should all work to rule across the Christmas period and then reballot as soon as possible.

by a Royal Mail worker in South Yorkshire

About Workers’ Liberty

This bulletin is produced by members of the Alliance for Workers’ Liberty..

We are a socialist group active in the labour and student movements in Britain, fighting for a revolutionary alternative to capitalism and Stalinism based on common ownership and workers’ democracy.



To find out more about our ideas and activity, visit our website at workersliberty.org, or email awl@workersliberty.org