

## Change and Resistance in the Royal Mail: Dispatches from the 2022/2023 Postal Workers' Strike

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### Abstract

This article presents the experiences of 'Karl', a veteran postal worker and trade union organiser. Karl's story outlines the impact of the myriad changes that have happened to the postal service and to the working life of postal workers since the privatisation of the Royal Mail in 2013. Karl highlights how new technologies – typically associated with the 'gig economy' – have permeated a formerly 'low tech', 'traditional' sector and have been used to intensify the labour process and discipline the workforce. Karl outlines the profound impact these changes have had on the postal workforce: eroding their autonomy, destroying their 'leisure in work' and affecting their physical and mental health. Karl's story also demonstrates the persistence of the 'public service ethos' in the Royal Mail despite privatisation. Workers argued that the 'modernisation' of the postal service had in fact led to the neglect of the universal mail service and the attendant erosion of the historic community function and status of the postal worker.

### Keywords

CWU, financialisation, gig economy, intensification, postal service, privatisation, Royal Mail, strikes, technology, trade unions

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## Introduction

Royal Mail – the British postal service – is over 500 years old. For centuries, it was a highly symbolic and trusted national institution, with postal workers enjoying status as beloved pillars of the community (Campbell-Smith, 2012). However, over the past 50 years, it has become a site of bitter industrial conflict as it was repeatedly restructured, before being privatised in 2013. As Mustchin (2017) argues, Royal Mail is significant for labour process scholars precisely because it is a case study in which new forms of control have embedded themselves in a former public service that was ‘once relatively insulated from such market pressures’ (Mustchin, 2017: 306), and in which workers enjoyed a degree of security and autonomy at work combined with relatively desirable terms and conditions.

This article presents an analysis of these changes from the perspective of a postal worker, ‘Karl’, and the attempts to resist them. The article is split into three sections: an overview of Royal Mail’s privatisation; theoretical reflections on the changes to the job following privatisation; and, finally, Karl’s story.

## Restructuring and resistance

The postal service’s journey to privatisation was piecemeal. Royal Mail was one of the few state institutions to escape privatisation under the Thatcher government (Thatcher herself apparently believed it sacrosanct). Nonetheless, during the 1980s and 1990s a cross-party political consensus emerged regarding the ‘need’ for the privatisation of the postal service (Martinez Lucio et al., 2000; Parker, 2014).

As a prelude to ‘formal’ privatisation, the service was subject to a plethora of commercialisation, modernisation and rationalisation initiatives involving the introduction of new public management techniques, fragmentation, automation and redundancies (cf. Jenkins et al., 1995; Martinez Lucio and Noon, 1994; Martinez Lucio et al., 2000). In 1986, it was separated into three different functions – Royal Mail letters, Royal Mail parcels (later *Parcelforce*) and the Post Office. In 2006, the postal service was formally opened to competition,<sup>1</sup> meaning that any licensed organisation could compete with Royal Mail for contracts in the new postal market. In 2008 and 2010, successive government-commissioned reports recommended the injection of private capital and ‘private sector discipline’ into Royal Mail as a way of ‘safeguarding’ the universal mail service (Hooper, 2008, 2010). Following these reports, in 2009, New Labour announced the privatisation of 30% of Royal Mail, only to then abandon the plan in the face of public and union opposition. However, this was only a temporary reprieve: the postal service was finally formally privatised in 2013 under the coalition government and listed on the stock exchange.

The commercialisation and eventual privatisation of Royal Mail greatly impacted industrial relations. Throughout most of the postwar period, Royal Mail was the exemplar of the Whitley tradition (Martinez Lucio and Noon, 1994: 72), with high levels of union density and a workforce seen to enjoy ‘golden’ terms and conditions, security and stability, and, relatedly, a relatively harmonious, stable relationship between workers and management. However, the relentless introduction of new practices prior to privatisation

led to increasingly bitter conflict between the postal workers union, the Communication Workers Union (CWU) and Royal Mail. Gradually, the culture and identity of the CWU shifted from one of relative conservatism and timidity to one of militancy and class conflict, playing an increasingly prominent and symbolic role within the British trade union movement throughout the 1990s. This culture of militancy attracted a significant amount of attention from industrial relations scholars (cf. Beale, 2003; Beale and Mustchin, 2014; Beirne, 2013; Darlington, 1993, 2002; Gall, 2001, 2003; Mustchin, 2017).

Although the workforce viewed privatisation with trepidation – 96% of postal workers voted against the proposal (BBC, 2013) – a significant partnership agreement was reached in 2014 between the CWU and Royal Mail, which was said to protect the ‘golden’ terms and conditions enjoyed by workers. Nonetheless, as Mustchin (2017) pointed out, despite the union’s public optimism about the agreement, it merely temporarily glossed over the irreconcilable contradictions between the new company’s shift to a financialised, shareholder dividends model in which labour is a cost that must be reduced (Thompson, 2003, 2013), and the union’s goal of maintaining traditional, public sector-style employment conditions.

### *Industrial action 2022–2023*

Sure enough, in August 2022, these tensions erupted as Royal Mail abruptly ended the agreement and attempted to impose a series of major changes upon the workforce. These included a below inflation pay offer; the introduction of self-employed ‘owner-drivers’ (already standard at Parcelforce); compulsory Sunday working; drastic changes to terms and conditions (such as cutting sick pay and shift allowances); separate contracts for new starters, creating a ‘two tier’ workforce; as well as threats of mass layoffs and derecognition of the CWU. Opposition to these changes was exacerbated by the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, coupled with news coverage of record dividends paid to Royal Mail shareholders.<sup>2</sup>

In response, the CWU called a strike, claiming that Royal Mail was ‘waging war on the workforce’ (Sweeney, 2023). The dispute lasted for 11 months, in which workers were on strike for 18 days, including a particularly bitter period over Christmas 2022. An agreement was finally reached between the CWU and Royal Mail in July 2023.

We conducted research with postal workers across Wales from the beginning of the dispute in the summer of 2022 until its conclusion in July 2023, utilising interviews and participant observation. Much of our access was facilitated by ‘Karl’, a 35-year Royal Mail veteran and union rep. On the picket lines it was clear that Karl was someone other workers respected and looked to for leadership and guidance. Karl was interviewed formally twice: once during the strike and once after a deal had been proposed nearly a year later. We continued to communicate throughout the strike and long afterwards, with Karl providing updates on branch activity, reactions to negotiations and other news. Karl’s story is comprised of long-form verbatim excerpts from our first interview, organised thematically.

### **Changes to postal work following privatisation**

The impact of privatisation on the postal workforce was enormous. As predicted by Thompson (2003: 367), the financialisation of the Royal Mail and the drive for

shareholder profitability immediately led to cutting ‘people costs’ through ‘taking out labour’ via layoffs. Extra ‘performance’ was then ‘squeezed’ out of the remaining workers (Thompson, 2013: 479) through a rapid intensification of the labour process. Rather than seek consensus for these changes, the organisation relied on enforcement through aggressive management.

The CWU explicitly branded the changes as the ‘Uberisation’ of the postal service (Communication Workers Union [CWU], 2022). Much of the intensification and casualisation that Karl and his colleagues experienced is not ‘new’, nor is it specific to the ‘gig economy’, but rather the ‘standard’ changes associated with privatisation (cf. Nichols and Davidson, 1993; Rhodes, 2005). Nonetheless, following the introduction of competition into the sector, Royal Mail’s ‘core’ workers had come to define themselves against the competitor courier companies and ‘peripheral’ workers that surrounded them (Gorz, 1989). Throughout the strike, the ‘gig economy’ thus became a new shorthand used by workers to describe and make sense of the myriad, negative changes to their working conditions and job security. Echoing Thompson’s (2003: 369) claim that new ‘innovative’ forms of control rapidly spread within sectors as ‘best practice’, Karl and his colleagues argued that the Royal Mail leadership were ‘learning’ from the employment practices of the courier companies they were competing with, and attempting to bring these conditions into the Royal Mail.

One of the most tangible parallels with the gig economy was the way in which technology had penetrated this previously ‘low tech’ sector. The ‘algorithmic control’ (Wood et al., 2019) that increasingly defines the gig economy had permeated the service and the lives of the workforce. The relative autonomy and freedom traditionally associated with delivering the mail – walking outdoors, free from bosses looking over your shoulder, so central to why many postmen wanted to do the job in the first place – had been gradually eroded through the introduction of surveillance technologies such as postal digital assistants (or PDAs), which tracked workers’ movements whether on foot or by van. Here, far from being a disembodied, remote master, technology was simply a new disciplinary tool that augmented an already confrontational managerial regime (Darlington, 1993).

The level of intensification and surveillance was such that the sociability, camaraderie and fun – what Edwards and Scullion (1982) call ‘leisure *in* work’ – that had previously been central to the role, had been destroyed. Not only this, life *outside* work had been affected: the famously early starting hours of the postal service, which previously allowed workers to engage in family and caring responsibilities after work, had also now been eroded by the introduction of new start times.

Central to the Royal Mail is the ‘universal service obligation’, a legally binding commitment to at least one delivery per week and the pledge that every part of the UK – including its islands and rural areas – gets the same postal service for the same price. Karl, like all our other respondents, was fiercely proud of the Royal Mail and the historic function of the postman in the community as a pillar of sociability and communality, providing a lifeline to the elderly and isolated. As found in previous studies of privatisation (Kirtton and Guillaume, 2019; Strangleman, 2002), to workers on the ground, the new reforms were increasingly inexplicable and deeply inefficient in terms of providing a universal public service, which they alleged was being deliberately destroyed.<sup>3</sup> The striking postal workers demonstrated the survival of the ‘public service ethos’ in the

Royal Mail despite privatisation (Davies, 2012): the strike was about defending both their own terms and conditions but also the existence of the universal mail service.

Karl's story is a tale of a group of workers desperately attempting to resist the destruction of a way of life that is close to extinction: a unionised, secure, working-class job with good terms and conditions, and the stability this provided for families and communities.

## **Karl's story**

I've been working for them for 35 years, since I was 18. I never dreamt about being a postman to be honest – I wanted to be a footballer.

I grew up back in the 1970s, during one of the depressions. I left school and I had six months on the dole, then I went to college, then I did a few furloughs and getting cash in hand jobs. I had a job with a bakery, driving their van, when I was about 18. I left there and ended up here.

In those times it was a job for life. Now, it doesn't seem to be. People would say, 'You get a job working for Royal Mail – it's a good job, you'll be there for life', that sort of thing. And, obviously, it is more or less a lifetime. But it's not that way anymore – it's very precarious. You're seeing people who've got 20 to 30 years' service, and they're leaving the business because of the way the staff are being treated.

It used to be a good, secure job, and you had pride in your job, but it's getting to a point now where they're just constantly looking to pick on you. You've got the PDA, so when you drive you've got them watching you. And when you're indoors as a postman, they're looking at you through the Through Process [mail sorting machine], and monitoring that too.

I'm on 37 hours a week. I started on 43 hours back in the 1980s. Over the years we've been trying to get it down. There's been a drive to get on the 35-hour week, with the same number of paid breaks. Which is the norm for some places.

They've started recruiting people on 40-hour contracts. They'll be on the same total pay but they're going to be doing three hours more than us. If you work it out, that's 20% less pay. And, obviously, their terms and conditions are different from ours that we've currently got. It'll be mandatory that they're expected to work over seven days, whereas we currently work six.

A lot of people became postmen because of the start and finish times. You could pick your kid up from school, and it helps with your partner's job where they'll take them to school in the morning, and you'd pick them up in the afternoon. We had a work-life balance, where you'd have the weekends to try and share with your family. Now, they want you to come into work at weekends, and get rid of the Sunday premium.

We're on £13 an hour. If people want a living wage of £15 an hour that would be a wage increase for postmen. We're not far off the minimum wage. The union has helped us. But you're seeing now they want you to work harder, faster and longer for less money.

I think the best thing about the job is we can have a laugh and a joke. That has lessened over the years – it's become more and more serious, but you could sometimes come in here and some of the laughs, the jokes and the windups we'd have, they'd be priceless. You would come to work to have that laughter – it's good for yourself, it's priceless. You couldn't put money on that fucking laugh. Something would happen and you'd be on the

floor, d'you know what I mean? Cheering you up all day, you'd just be thinking about it and the day would just fly by; but then there's days that just grind on because these fuckers are on top. I suppose it's the same with every job where there's ups and downs, but it surprised me when I walked in over the weekend [day after a strike day] and I looked, and I went, 'Fuck'. I'm looking at the mail, I'm looking at the backlogs and I'm thinking, 'Fuck me, man, it's [Christmas mail] not going to happen, I can see it. What really got me was the Christmas cards. I normally deliver to my family who live locally. But I've got family all over the UK, and I'm thinking, 'Oh fuck, how are we going to get their cards to them?'.

I used to take pride in what I delivered. It took it out of you with the automated stuff, when I used to run the machines, but we were still proud of the fact that we'd cleared. And there was a genuine pride right there, you'd made somebody happy, especially over Christmas, because they've had their cards, although not so much their fucking bills.

I've seen it on the doorstep when I've given cards and presents to people. The thanks and the genuine thank you that they give you, they've given me tips and stuff like that, and I've said 'no'. But the old ladies giving me mince pies, and stuff like that, and they say, 'No, I insist', and you've got to take it.

Now it doesn't feel the same. We're a week away from Christmas and there's no buzz. It's usually buzzing at this time of the year – people are normally getting ready, everyone gearing up for their Christmas holidays. But it's just killed it. It's weird, it's so un-Christmas, honest to God.

We try to keep that camaraderie going with the older crews that we've got in here. Some of the banter and the piss-taking is legendary – you see it on the picket line. That's the best thing about the job, and there is a sense of pride in completing a day's work. But it has got worse over the years.

### *'Uberisation' and the destruction of the universal mail service*

Royal Mail are not looking to grow the service. We've got the biggest reach of any parcel or letter company – we've got access to 32 million addresses every day. But they don't want to keep doing that, they want to shrink the service and the workforce because they don't want to have that type of reach.

We deliver Amazon's mail for them: Amazon Prime gets delivered by the postman. What happens is, Amazon will dump stuff into Royal Mail and say there'll be 1000 Prime items, but 1500 or 2000 will turn up. And Royal Mail are obligated to take them because they don't want to lose Amazon as a customer, so Amazon gets priority.

They're trying to grow that Sunday delivery 'product'. It's 'premium'. If you order something Saturday night, from certain firms like Boots or John Lewis, then you'll get it the next day on the Sunday morning or afternoon. That's the only thing they're trying to grow. But they're not trying to be innovative. There's so much that a postman can do in a community, like what we were doing during the pandemic with the test kits: not only would we deliver them, we'd pick them up from the houses.

When they say, 'We're not up for modernisation', we sorted those deals out, the workforce. It was **us** who implemented that on the ground, and we did it quickly, in a short amount of time, and made sure that everything was covered. And we had the necessary expertise: we had that reach, right into every delivery office in the country.

This is what I don't get: you've got your businesses saying, 'We've got to modernise, we've got to reform, we've got to do this, we've got to do that'. We have done it! As a union and a workforce, we know there's got to be change. As technology comes in, we get an agreement on how to put the technology in, the investment, and then bang, we'll get on with it. So rather than sort mail manually, I would rather work on a machine and do it. It's just natural. Ergonomically, it's not good for you to be stood there all day sorting parcels and stuff like that. When it comes to sorting parcels, because they're awkward, you just want to get it done as efficiently as possible. So, we've always embraced automation. But when *they're* talking about technology, the type of technology they want to bring in is performance management technology. So they can monitor how many items you sort as an individual. They're going to measure your performance as an individual on the sorting machines and they want us to agree to this, bearing in mind that . . . it could be a fault with the machine. Or it could be a fault in the material stuff that we're using, because obviously the products get stuck sometimes. But they'll always go to the lowest common denominator and blame the man, because the machine can't be wrong, because the machine is built to do so many thousand an hour. But it doesn't always work like that.

They think these targets are realistic but they aren't always going to be achievable. For instance, in delivery they've got a PDA which monitors how fast you walk. I think they've got it down to an average that they want, so you've got to walk at four miles an hour. Now, if you're a 23-year-old doing that walk or that delivery, you're going to do it faster than a 60-year-old. But what they'll do is, they'll compare – so they'll be asking you, as a 60-year-old, 'Why can't you do that?'. The boys do 20,000 steps a day plus. If you're doing that over five days, it's the best part of 100,000 a week. Plus, you think, being in your 60s, it's going to have a physical demand on your body. You send a 60-year-old out in all temperatures, even in these abnormal temperatures, and plus they want to move the delivery span back into the afternoon, so all those extra hours they're going to be outdoors – it's dark in Britain at 3 p.m. in the winter months. And let's face it, some of the neighbourhoods around here are rough, and you've got some undesirable people living in these neighbourhoods, who are going to look and see these people as easy targets to rob.

They talk about modernisation and 'the union is against it', and this, that and the other. Their version of modernisation is that you should work faster and a lot longer for nothing. They're looking at our terms and conditions and they're thinking, 'Well, that costs us this much, that costs us that much'. Rather than growing the business and giving employees long-standing terms, which you could be proud of, they just think, 'We can make savings in that, and we'll have that much profit from it, and we can then give it to the shareholders and the hedge funds'. We've got an employer who's looking inward and wants to destroy his own workers' terms and conditions. They're looking at Amazon and Evri and these gig economy workers, and thinking, 'Well, we can make more money, we can make a profit if we could strip these people out of these terms and conditions, if we went to an Amazon or an Evri business model'. That's their ultimate goal, I think. They look at their [Amazon's] terms and conditions and they want us on those terms and conditions. They don't care about the customer: if they did, they would get a deal before Christmas. They don't care; it's all about the profit.



We're an iconic company, we've been going around for 500 years. With the reach we have, you're guaranteed to see a postman on the street every day. What they are doing is an abuse to us workers.

It just doesn't make any sense what they're doing. It's just all about cost-cutting. When you look at all these millionaire CEOs and millionaire Chairmen and the Board Members, the pay they're getting and the bonuses they're giving themselves, same with this Simon Thompson geezer. Some of the Board members are giving themselves a quarterly bonus of £140,000. It's getting to a point where we are thinking: 'Who gave you that? You give £750 million away to the shareholders, you've been pleading you've been losing £1 million a day, and yesterday you came out and said you've got a £1.7 billion war chest.'

Well, what's going on? What type of people are they? They're not fit to be in the job, to work for a company as illustrious as Royal Mail, with the history Royal Mail has – they shouldn't be anywhere near it. They should be working for betting firms – go and work for William Hill or one of those places. They could be proper greedy then.

### *Union and management*

All we want to do is be able to pay our bills and feed our children. But because we are defending our members' pay and conditions, they see us as a threat to them making a profit. We were talking to them back in February because anyone could see the cost-of-living crisis coming. We were saying, 'Well, bring it [the 2% pay offer] forward'. If they'd turned round and offered us 5% back in April, we probably would have taken it. But they were just hell-bent on imposing the deal on us. I mean, when you don't negotiate what are you? If you're not going to negotiate with your employees or the people who represent the employees, what type of person are you? You're a tyrant, as far as I'm concerned. It's tyranny.

They're saying they don't want compulsory redundancies. But we've got a document proving they do. Honest to God, they're some wicked liars, that's the only way I'd put it. I don't trust them like I don't trust the old bill [police].

They're hell-bent on getting rid of the union. They don't want us, they see us as having too much of a say in here, and it's stopping them getting any profit. And it's hindering them in really attacking its own workforce. Performance management is mentioned in the agreement that they want. And we said, 'Look, we're not having any of that whatsoever. We're not having that Amazon style where people are ending up dropping dead on the streets, and they're not getting paid. There's no way we're going back to that, we're not even entertaining it.'

They've declared war on the union. They've got a £1.7 billion fund just to break us. Our resilience is getting to our manager at the moment because his ego thought that he would be able to get people to come into work. He thinks, 'Hang on, they're only fucking postmen, I'm more educated than them, I'm on more money than them, how can they stop these people [strike breakers] from coming in?'. Because we're just stood on a gate.

I don't think they get that. They don't understand camaraderie. I don't think they have that as managers because they're all out to cut each other's throats. But that camaraderie has been handed down because of the last times we've been on strike, in 2009 and 2011.



It was easy back in the old days because you'd have the old fellows who'd been on some serious strikes. They'd keep everyone in line, and everyone would know what they're doing. There's a generation of kids here, so I class myself as the old fellows now. We're trying to show these younger generations, these kids in their 20s and their 30s, 'This is how it rolls now, this is how you've got to do it, this is what we've got to do'. They're all on temporary contracts and some of them are part-timers, but they've stepped up and we're nothing but proud of them.

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## Notes

1. In line with the 1998 and 2002 EU postal directives, which encouraged the liberalisation of state postal services (Meek, 2014).
2. £400 million was returned to shareholders at the end of 2021, with over £1 billion paid out since privatisation.
3. This repeated allegation from workers was seemingly vindicated as the CEO, Simon Thompson, stepped down amid allegations he had deliberately neglected the universal service obligation (Lawson, 2023). In November 2023, Royal Mail was fined £5.6 million by OFCOM for missing delivery targets. In January 2024, the British Government intervened to stop Royal Mail scrapping its Saturday delivery service.

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'Karl Jones' has been a postman for over 35 years. He is a union member and rep and has participated in multiple postal strikes since the 1980s.

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