

POSTAL NEWS

No. 134/2009

**Formulated by UNI-Japan Post in cooperation with UNI-Apro,
ASPEK Indonesia and SPPI**

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1. Postal workers plan more strikes

By Brian Groom and Gill Plimmer

Published: July 18 2009 03:00 | Last updated: July 18 2009 03:00

Royal Mail risks a permanent loss of business if the current wave of strikes continues, the postal operator warned as the Communication Workers' Union last night announced plans for more stoppages next week.

Workers in London plan three days of strikes - in deliveries on Saturday July 25, collections on July 27 and sorting on July 28. About 450 depots outside the capital are being balloted on strikes over the next few weeks.

Twelve thousand workers staged a 24-hour stoppage over jobs, pay and services yesterday. The CWU has warned that the dispute - which comes as part-privatisation has stalled - could turn into a national strike.

London, where 10,000 CWU members were striking yesterday, was the worst hit area but other centres affected included Edinburgh, Bristol, Darlington and Plymouth.

Royal Mail said almost all services outside London were operating normally as more than 90 per cent of its staff - about 150,000 - were not taking part in the stoppage. In London, 1,200 managers worked to maintain priority delivery and collection services.

The Direct Marketing Association said the stoppages were affecting businesses' ability to distribute marketing materials and fulfil orders and hitting -everyday transactions such as sending out invoices.

Royal Mail and the union have blamed each other for the unrest. It is being fuelled by Royal Mail's efforts to cope with a 10 per cent fall in mail volumes.

In a national dispute two years ago Royal Mail lost business to private competitors, which now have a third of the market for collecting and sorting letters, although 95 per cent are still delivered by the state-owned operator.

"While the indications are that we have not lost business yet, why would you want to take that risk in a very competitive market, not just with other courier companies but when you are competing very much against electronic media?" a Royal Mail official said.

David Smith, director of operations at IMRG, which represents online retailers, said strikes would push retailers into using other operators. "Big retailers will look at alternative carriers . . . for smaller companies that are solely reliant on Royal Mail for delivery, it will be hugely damaging if it carries on," he said.

Guy Buswell , chief executive of Business Post, which has 17 per cent of the UK postal market, said the strike was "very bad for mail generally". Nick Wells, chief executive of TNT Post's UK operations, said it was "bad for the industry and bad for the medium".

Dave Ward, CWU deputy general secretary, repeated the union's offer of a three-month no-strike period to enable a modernisation agreement to be negotiated.

"These attacks on jobs and services must stop and Royal Mail must negotiate on the real issue," he said.

The company said the offer was "deliberately misleading". It added the union had instructed branches not to co-operate over introducing new equipment and changes in working -practices.

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2. Postal Service to retire vending machines

Published: July 23, 2009 at 8:32 PM

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NEWPORT NEWS, Va., July 23 (UPI) -- U.S. Postal Service centers are getting rid of postage stamp vending machines, the service says.

The service's 12,000 vending machines will be eliminated nationwide Aug. 4, victims of obsolescence and cost-cutting.

"Most of these machines were 20 years old," Frances Sansone, a Postal Service spokeswoman, told The Daily Press of Newport News, Va.

And most customers using the machines usually buy just single stamps nowadays, she said

"We're not taking in enough money to work the machines," Sansone said.

By removing the machines, the Postal Service expects to save at least \$66 million on expenses, maintenance, parts and labor.

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3. Trends force postal cuts Online habits, economy reduce mail volume in region

By DJ Slater • Wausau Daily Herald • July 24, 2009

The U.S. Postal Service is restructuring delivery routes and cutting back on overtime in central Wisconsin because the amount of mail routed through the area has declined by about 150 million pieces in the past two years.

Two factors have forced the changes: More people are paying bills and making other transactions online instead of with a traditional envelope and stamp, and as the economy has slumped, so has the number of packages and other mail being sent.

As a result, the Wausau post office cut its summer hours and made route and overtime changes as federal officials have begun discussing more fundamental changes, such as ending Saturday mail service.

"We're hurting," said Mark Rask, the service manager for the postal area that includes Wausau, Tomahawk and Plover. "The economy is tough right now, and that's weighing on us."

Rask's area is projecting a \$5.5 million drop, or about 5 percent, in its total revenue as well as a decrease in mail volume by 85 million pieces, or about 13 percent, for 2009 compared with last year, he said. During the 2008 fiscal year, the area had \$108.8 million in revenue and distributed about 650 million pieces of mail.

Wausau resident Laurie Schmidt has contributed to the trend. She now pays her bills online, saying it's easier than having to stuff an envelope, write out her return address and drop a check in the mailbox.

"It's much more convenient," she said.

Despite the volume and revenue declines, residents within the service area that spans from Plover north to Saxon and from Withee east to Bowler won't feel any of these changes, Rask said.

Even with overtime reduced by 11,300 hours, or 28.7 percent, out of 41,000 overtime hours used last year, mail still will arrive on time each day and be picked up at the

same frequency as in past years. That's possible because with a smaller mail volume, some mail carriers spend less time on their routes.

Carriers who used to spend eight hours on their routes now spend about six hours, after which they work on other routes, said Kregg Hoehn, a mail carrier who's been with the Postal Service in Wausau for 25 years.

By Aug. 22, routes will change as central Wisconsin's postal area finishes making adjustments. Of 153 city routes in the service area, 146 will remain, which will allow mail carriers to spend most of their time on a single route, Rask said.

Despite the changes, none of the post offices in the service area is in danger of closing, Rask said. He also doesn't expect to see any layoffs, mainly because the service area has been downsizing by attrition, or not filling positions after someone retires. Rask has reduced his staff by 48 employees out of 1,247 through attrition since 2005, he said.

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4. Russian postal workers to let police open mail

July 19, 2009.

By KARINA IOFFEE (AP) – 5 days ago

MOSCOW — The Russian government has issued an order telling postal workers that police and security agents have a right to open mail, causing alarm among rights advocates who fear a return to the Soviet-era tactics of the KGB.

The Communications Ministry said the order, which went into effect Tuesday, does not expand the powers of investigators, since they still need to obtain a court's permission as required by law if they want to open letters or packages.

But rights advocates said the order is unconstitutional because it does not mention the need for court permission. The document, filling two pages in small print, explains in detail to postal workers that investigators have access to the mail and postal data bases, and can demand a separate work space within post offices.

Critics said the new order is dangerous because it has the potential to further embolden Russia's security services, who have grown increasingly powerful under Vladimir Putin, the former president who is now prime minister.

The Moscow Helsinki Group and other prominent rights groups sent a letter to the Justice Ministry saying that the order directly contradicts the constitution and federal laws because it infringes on the right to privacy. The letter demanded the order be changed.

The Communications Ministry defended the order.

"This document does not expand the power of the security agencies conducting investigations ... and in no way violates the rights of postal service employees or human rights," ministry spokeswoman Yulia Bulankina said in a written statement.

The ministry then posted a document on its Web site spelling out under what conditions investigators can open mail and making clear that they need a court order.

Viktor Parshutkin, a lawyer specializing in criminal law, said the order was a clear violation of the constitution. Security agents often are unable to present the evidence necessary to get a court order, he said, suggesting that some may prefer to try to skirt the law.

"The security agencies are among the least controlled groups in Russia," Parshutkin said. "They are some of the most aggressive and irresponsible people, and present a danger to civil society."

Many Russians were not aware of the recent order. Some said they were outraged, but others were more blase, saying they assumed their personal information was easily accessible already.

"I'm more concerned about how low my pension is and the high cost of medicine," said Valentina, an 82-year-old retired teacher. "If they want to look in my mail, I have nothing to hide."

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