

INSIDE:



**PAGE 3
JOBS BOMBHELL
ROCKS A&L**

Announcement of 1,000 redundancies comes as a bitter blow to hard-working staff



**PAGE 5
CHRISTMAS CAROL
FOR AGENCY STAFF**

Nightmare start to 2009 for agency workers as the fight for a long overdue pay rise goes on



**SEE INSERT
MPs REJECT
SELLOUT**

CWU's 'Keep the Post Office Public' campaign gets off to a flying start

VOICE



TELECOMS & FINANCIAL SERVICES | JANUARY & FEBRUARY 2009

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HAZARDS AHOY

PAGES 8 & 9 CWU sets course to weather the storm as 2009 gets off to a challenging start



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CWU cashback
Membership benefits detailed at
www.cwucashback.co.uk

In most cases your branch should be your first point of contact. Details are on your membership card.

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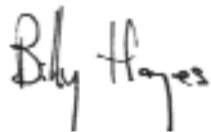
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BILLY HAYES
GENERAL SECRETARY



The GS column can always be viewed prior to publication of the VOICE, along with daily updates on recent events at Billy's weblog: www.billyhayes.co.uk

October 2008 saw the CWU host a very successful fringe meeting at Labour Party Conference.

The meeting was addressed by both our Deputy General Secretaries, the General Secretary, Rt Hon Harriet Harman QC MP, Deputy Leader and Chair of the Labour Party, together with the then BERR Secretary of State, Rt Hon John Hutton MP and Seamus Milne, journalist and commentator at the Guardian newspaper.

In the last few weeks, the issue of universal access has been in the news.

Lord Carter, the Communications Minister, unveiled his plan for high speed Broadband. Ambitious in its outlook, he promises to have access available to all Britain's 27 million addresses by the time of the 2012 Olympic Games.

Of course, getting the infrastructure up to date costs money – as much as £3.5 billion - to enable two megabites per second (mbps). Some have suggested that the whole of the Telecoms industry should pay their fair wack.

The union believes that the competition to BT cannot have it both ways – enjoy benefits of the USO and not pay toward the cost.

Hooper Report

In its initial findings, it agreed with the CWU view on the impact of liberalisation, i.e. that it benefitted no one, apart from big business who cream skim Royal Mail's work.

“LEADERSHIP HAS A HARDER JOB TO DO THAN JUST CHOOSE SIDES. IT MUST BRING SIDES TOGETHER”
JESSE JACKSON
CIVIL RIGHTS LEADER USA

Some of the conclusions of Mr Hooper's final report are welcome.

The recognition of the value of the USO and the need for the State to recognise its responsibilities on the Royal Mail Pension Fund.

The Government benefitted from a 13 year pension fund contributions holiday and they now need to redress the balance.

Although, taking on the assets (estimated at £27 billion) of the Scheme, is not without value to them.

But Mr Hooper's support for privatisation of Royal Mail offers no solution. The Government betrays its promise to the British people in 2005 not to privatise Royal Mail. All three major political parties are now indistinguishable on solutions for Royal Mail, aside from some nuances.

The Government will pay a heavy price if it continues on its course of action.

Watch this space.

Tony Young

Lord Tony Young, former General Secretary of the National Communications Union and former Joint General Secretary of CWU, has been given a place in Government as Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Skills and Apprenticeships.

Congratulations to Tony. As a former apprentice with BT and with the depth of his experience, Tony will be an effective spokesperson for Government.

As Chair of Unionlearn I look forward to working with him.

CWU in the news...



The campaign against Royal Mail privatisation has been extensively covered throughout the mainstream press since the New Year. It's clearly going to be the major domestic political issue over the next few weeks and months with intensive media coverage. So, for this month, rather than cover the news, I want you to think about how you can help shape it.

Kevin Slocombe, Head of communications, kslocombe@cwu.org

You can do so by joining the fight to **keep the post public**. Regardless of which business you work in, keeping your UK postal service in your ownership is crucial. If our Royal Mail is part-sold now, it will only be a matter of time before the whole company is in private hands.

Not only will that mean massive job losses, it will also see the gradual deterioration of this vital public service.

Inside this edition are two postcards, which we urge you to send to your MP, calling on her or him to sign Early Day Motion 428 opposing the sellout. This motion is currently at the centre of our campaign as the opposition of a large

number of MPs will force the government to reconsider.

Please give the other postcard to somebody who will also send it to their MP. You can find your MP and contact details at www.writetothem.com

Please also read the Number 10 petition at <http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/Royal-Mail-Sale> and add your name to the long list of names already there. Encourage your family and friends to do the same.

If you have the time, you could visit your MP in person at her or his weekly constituency surgery - and encourage your workmates and colleagues to come along. You could then explain how important having a

Royal Mail, dedicated to public service rather than private profit, really is.

Another important way to make your views known and shape the news is to write to your local newspaper - remember, more people read their local newspaper than the national press.

Now, more than ever, it's time for all of us to roll up our sleeves and get to work saving the public post.

If we get it right, you will read all about our success in the news.





Image credit: Howard Burns

Altered image: The "we are closer; we are stronger; we are Santander" slogan of the bank's current advertising campaign rings hollow for A&L employees as one in 12 are earmarked for redundancy

Jobs bombshell at A&L

Members at A&L received an unwelcome New Year's message from the bank's new owners in the form of an announcement that Santander is seeking around 2,000 redundancies across its UK operations.

1,000 of the job losses will fall within Alliance & Leicester's 7,700-strong UK workforce. "This is a bitter blow to hard-working staff," assistant secretary Nigel Cotgrove told the Voice. "Intensive discussions with the bank are continuing to maintain the maximum number of jobs possible."

At the time of printing a voluntary redundancy (VR) exercise was getting underway for Bands 1 to 3, following detailed discussions between the union and company negotiators covering who can apply for VR in which areas of the bank.

"The important thing for CWU members, is that we've managed to keep a voluntary approach for Bands 1 to 3 – unlike some other parts of Santander – and we're working through the implications," stressed Nigel Cotgrove.

"A&L management has confirmed

that all areas are in scope, except the retail network, current account contact centres, Savings Direct, Collections, the Belfast Mortgage Centre and Bank Assurance IFAs."

At present there are no plans to close any A&L sites, though the company has refused to rule that out as a possibility. The union has, however, secured assurances that the massive sites at Bootle on Merseyside and at Carlton Park in Leicester are not at risk in the current rationalisation exercise.

"The fact that Bootle and Carlton Park will certainly survive as major sites is particularly welcome because there's no doubt that it would be a disaster for the local communities if they were to shut," said Nigel.

Joe Reynolds, national secretary of the ALGUS national branch, added: "Since the announcement that Santander was taking over A&L we've experienced a major influx of new members who are naturally concerned, and I'd urge any non-members to join the union as a matter of priority.

"The simple fact is that the stronger our membership is, the stronger our voice in our dealings with the company, and hence our ability to protect our members' interests at A&L both now and in the future."

SPANISH SOLIDARITY...
Amid ongoing developments at Alliance & Leicester the CWU has already had positive discussions with the largest union representing workers in Santander's Spanish operations with a view to forging mutually beneficial links.

A special meeting between the CWU and CCOO (Confederacion Sindical de Comisiones Obreras) took place in Madrid at the end of last year to discuss the implications of the takeover. The two unions have now committed to work together on a range of areas of mutual interest, including job security.

Deputy general secretary Andy Kerr, who led the CWU delegation, told the Voice: "As A&L is now part of a global operation it is important that the CWU starts to act internationally. We look forward to

working with CCOO and other Spanish unions in the future."

Assistant secretary Nigel Cotgrove added: "Following our meeting I'm really hopeful that by working with our union colleagues in Spain we can extend our influence within Santander to the benefit of CWU members.

CWU international officer John Baldwin concludes: "I'd like to place on record our thanks to CCOO for ensuring that we met so soon after the takeover."



Andy Kerr (right) with CCOO's finance sector general secretary Jose Martinez Lopez

● Members will continue to be kept informed of developments by way of electronic newsletters. Regular updates will be posted at www.cwu.org

BT pay claim lodged

A demand for a "significant pay increase in real terms" was in the process of being lodged with BT as the Voice went to press.

Set against a backdrop of falling inflation and uncertainty as to how low the Retail Price Index (RPI) measure - on which negotiations with the company are based - will get, the Telecoms and Financial Services Executive agreed earlier this month to set out the arguments for an above-inflation pay rise rather than submitting a specific percentage claim.

The decision followed an extensive consultation of branches prior to what is expected to be an especially difficult pay round given the prevailing economic uncertainty.

December's RPI figure, released in January, showed a 2.1 per cent decrease from November's rate of 3 per cent, bringing RPI to 0.9 per cent. The key RPI rate influencing BT pay

for negotiating purposes is the March figure, published in April.

Deputy general secretary Andy Kerr told the Voice: "There's no doubt that pay talks are going to be exceptionally hard this year – and I'm certain that there will be some people in the company at a very high level who will be arguing for a pay freeze.

"The CWU will be strongly arguing the counter point that, while BT has its problems, it is still a very profitable organisation, and when push comes to shove it is our people who generate cash for the company.

"As far as I'm concerned they are entitled to a decent wage and a decent rise in every year – and the CWU sees no reason why this year should be different. That is why the Executive is resolved to secure an above inflation pay rise that represents an increase in real terms for members."

BT stats "a scandal"

BT's latest discipline statistics have been branded a "scandal".

Information received before Christmas, relating to the first six months of 2008, show a shocking increase of nearly 20 per cent in the number of discipline cases brought against CWU members. The number of members charged with misconduct rose from 629 in the second half of 2007 to 741 of the first 6 months of 2008 – an increase of 18 per cent.

The steep increase was hidden by the overall number of discipline cases opened rising very slightly from 865 cases to 899. However, national officer Simon Sapper points out: "The headline figure masks the very worrying fact that if a disciplinary case is opened against you, there is less than a 1-in-6 chance that it will be dropped with no action apart from the fact-finding interview."

An analysis of the statistics reveals that quality and attendance account

for almost half of all cases by cause, with Openreach accounting for two thirds of all discipline cases, and Retail one quarter.

Simon added: "Over 40 per cent of Openreach discipline cases are about quality. This cannot be right."

CWU representatives will be making their disquiet clear at a forthcoming meeting with BT. Of just as much concern, however, is the information which the company says it is not able to provide to the CWU - including the length of precautionary suspensions, the geographical distribution of offences and the disciplinary sanctions applied.

Simon concludes: "It's hard to believe BT is serious about wanting to work with us to cure what we see as a massive disciplinary problem without this information. In fact it raises questions about the quality of governance within the company as a whole."

InBrief

Yell pain minimised

The CWU has managed to ensure that thus far there have been no compulsory redundancies at Yell after the company announced 350 job losses before Christmas. Of the 39 jobs involving CWU represented grades, all but six workers have been either redeployed or received voluntary redundancy. The remaining six are the subject of ongoing discussions. Assistant secretary Dave Johnson believes that given the situation the union managed to get the best possible deal for its members. "By working together with Yell we are absolutely confident that we can achieve total resolution to the future redeployment for our remaining members" said Dave.

Stepping up at VM

Virgin reps from across the country have agreed to raise the question of increased working hours and pressure to do more jobs per day with the company. The CWU will conduct a survey of the Virgin workforce to see just how widespread this abuse of the goodwill of workers has become. "People have reported that they are under pressure not to take breaks and to work through the day," said Grace Mitchell, assistant secretary, who indicated that the union will be upping the activity at Virgin with a view to organising more areas of the company. Full story at www.cwu.org/vmreps/

More talks on CTC hours

The CWU has successfully persuaded BT Operate to suspend its imposition of Monday to Friday working at the Career Transition Centre. People moving into the CTC do so from a range of backgrounds, bringing with them a significant number of different attendance patterns which take in weekends and nights – sometimes including a scheduled weekday off. The company planned to implement the new Monday to Friday pattern of working for all from January 8, but as a result of CWU representations this has been deferred pending further negotiations.

Tyre pressure victory

All drivers of BT vehicles are being issued with a tyre pressure gauge suitable for their vehicle – thanks in large part to the dogged persistence of CWU safety rep Terry Letchford. Last year, Executive member Tom Cooper took up the case, charged with the task of getting all lines of business in BT to agree to pay for the gauges. This was achieved at the Commercial Vehicles Forum and last month the issuing of the gauges began. Tom told the Voice: "Thanks go to Terry for the work he's put in over the years." More at www.cwu.org/tyres/

InBrief

Computacenter pay deal

As Voice went to press members in the recognised part of Computacenter were voting on a pay deal that was recommended unanimously by the negotiating team – including the Computacenter lead reps. The deal provides for 2.5 per cent on pay and pay related allowances and additional 2.5 per cent on London Weighting. Pending approval by members, the deal would be backdated to January 1. Assistant secretary Colin O'Callaghan told the Voice: "With current inflation (RPI) running at 0.9 per cent, a pay deal of 2.5 per cent means that our members have been offered a real increase when measured against the cost of living."

Greening Openreach

The Openreach programme on environment and climate change is now in its second year – with campaign organisers stressing that as well as big initiatives – including the trials currently taking place of electric vans – the small changes individuals can make in their day-to-day lives should not be overlooked. "Switching off unneeded lights or putting paper into a recycling bin might not appear to make a difference but over 30,000 people doing it will," points out Openreach environment and climate change champion Ian Hill. CWU national officer for Openreach, Ian Cuthbert, comments: "We welcome any genuine initiatives to tackle climate change so we are broadly supportive of Openreach on this issue. Full story at www.cwu.org/vejf09/

Making a stand

Public-spirited CWU member Sam Brooks couldn't believe her eyes when she witnessed a bus driver refusing to allow a blind woman with a guide dog on board because there was already another guide dog on the bus. Appalled by the incident in Cambridge, Sam – a security guard at Cambridge BT Building employed by Reliance Security Services Ltd (RSSL) – intervened to argue the point, but to no avail. Determined that an injustice should be righted, however, she contacted her local paper – resulting in bus company assurances that extra training would be given to drivers "to avoid a repeat". Assistant secretary Simon Sapper told Voice: "Good on Sam for her public-spiritedness."

Sound of silence

The former BT Brass Band – which during earlier incarnations was known as the POEU Band and then the NCU Band – has been forced to call it a day because of the cold financial climate. Latterly known as Stockport Brass, the ensemble never recovered a firm financial footing after BT ended 20 years of support in 2007. CWU member Colin Doran – one of just two BT employees in the band's final line-up – told the Voice: "It's a sign of the times."

Pensions deal accepted



Rising life expectancy and falling investment returns means something has to give

Members in BT have given their strong endorsement to proposed changes to the company's two major pension schemes, the BTPS and the BTRP. In a consultative ballot on a draft agreement reached by negotiators from BT, the CWU and Connect just before Christmas, 67 per cent of CWU members who voted accepted the deal – double the number who voted to reject it.

Deputy general secretary Andy Kerr told the Voice of his satisfaction that members had backed the deal by a two-to-one margin in an unusually high turnout for a postal ballot.

"Maintaining the defined benefit pension scheme and improving the defined contribution pensions in BT have been our key objectives in these negotiations. I see the result as a clear indication that members recognised that what we were recommending was a good deal overall – and the best we could possibly achieve in the circumstances.

"With all the indicators suggesting that the deficit of £3.4 billion at the last valuation will have risen

considerably by the time the new figure is published in April, I think the reason for making a deal now has been vindicated. Had we waited until April the pressure from some quarters to close the scheme altogether would have been that much greater."

Connect members also voted to support the agreement in an e-mail ballot. Their turnout was 59 per cent, with 85 per cent voting to accept the agreement and 15 per cent rejecting it.

Both unions will now be conducting detailed discussions with BT on the implementation of this complex agreement before it is ultimately signed. The changes will apply from April 1.

Andy stressed, however, that the improvements to the money-purchase BTRP contained within the new deal are not the end of the story. "BT has committed to review the BTRP element again in 2011 – and as such the CWU would expect talks to start prior to the end of 2010. Our intention will be to seek further improvements to that scheme at that time."

PM to be monitored for fairness!

The CWU has moved to actively monitor BT's implementation of Performance Management (PM) to ensure that it is not being used simply as a means to reduce head count.

When PM was put onto the automated 'eperformance' system it did away with 'informal' Performance Improvement Plans (PIP), meaning that there could be a straight move to a formal PIP. This system has been implemented across BT except in Retail and Openreach where it will be rolled out in April.

The rancour that was stirred by the implementation of the new system was palpable at a forum discussion involving reps and BT group head of employee relations Brian English (reported in the last issue of Voice).

Since then, the CWU has enacted a dual approach, encouraging members to report abuses of the process to a dedicated email line and to take up individual abuses with their branches. This approach will enable the union to get an overall picture of how the new PM is being implemented.

It is important to ensure that the removal of the informal PIP is not simply being used as a tactic by BT management to make it easier to put staff onto the formal disciplinary procedures.

As Grace Mitchell, assistant secretary, points out: "Most people who are put onto an informal PIP do not progress onto a formal PIP and

formal warning."

There have been assurances from BT that the process will not be abused with the company agreeing that there has to be a meeting with the member, evidence of under performance and timescales set for improvement before there can be any move to formal warnings. In cases where there is abuse of procedure, members should email btperformance@cwu.org with the details.

Grace also warns that any signs of targeting of PIPs, say against the bottom 10 or 25 per cent should also be reported in the same manner as it is "totally unacceptable practice."

BT has committed that such targeting should not be taking place.

The union is keen to ensure that the new automated PM system will not result in the removal of 1-2-1 meetings, and is urging members to report any such instances to the designated email line highlighted at the bottom of this article.

BT has made it clear that only a 'Good' rating is now acceptable and that 'Generally Satisfactory' will result in at least an informal discussion.

"The CWU does not agree with this stance and has been pressing BT hard on this issue," said Grace. "The best assurance we have is that a 'Generally Satisfactory' mark will not result in an automatic PIP and warning."

Again any abuse should be reported to the email line.

The union is aware of the way in

which management is using the 'levelling process' in rating staff. "If a member is unhappy with his or her score they should ask whether it was as a result of the levelling process and ask for a copy of the evidence used at the levelling meeting that resulted in the score," said Grace, who again urged those who felt they were being victimised to report it on the designated email line below.

● Report any suspected abuses of the Performance Management process to btperformance@cwu.org



Watching: Assistant secretary Grace Mitchell

Airwave fears allayed

Widespread suspicion amongst members at Airwave about the company's plans to review its grading structure have been substantially quelled. The breakthrough came as CWU negotiators secured badly needed reassurances that the grading review Airwave hopes to complete by April is, indeed, just a 'review' rather than an immediate attempt to change terms and conditions. Neither will the review impact on the 2009 pay round – another concern that had been troubling members.

Assistant secretary Grace Mitchell told the Voice: "Members had been viewing the grading review with considerable suspicion, but on the basis of the assurances we've been given the CWU is now comfortable to have the discussion on the basis that we'll will be fully consulted."

"The company has assured us there will be no negative impact on individuals' terms and conditions stemming directly from the review, which is, Airwave insists, simply about developing a single grading spine. Clearly Airwave are going to want to talk to us about whatever emerges from the review for CWU-represented grades – but that will be an entirely separate discussion.

The main thing is that existing terms such as increments and the pay and pension protection allowance will not be affected by this review.

"Our aim is to ensure the grading structure is as fair as it can be."

● Special Airwave focus on page 15

Stark injustice hits home hard



Image credit: Howard Burns

Set adrift: Agency workers are especially vulnerable in troubled economic times. See page 8

The scale of agency workers' vulnerability to events beyond their control is being highlighted in the current economic downturn by the abrupt termination of over 1,000 Manpower and Kelly Services agency assignments.

As Voice went to press clusters of agency posts had already been cut at dozens of BT sites across the country. The drip-drip-drip of bad news has included hundreds of job losses at a handful of sites and between 20 to 50 at many others - the unpredictability of the process generating fear across the agency population. (See page 8)

"It's brutal out there," stresses the national officer responsible for agency workers across the telecoms sector, assistant secretary Sally Bridge.

"Because of the way these job cuts are being announced the CWU can't prepare for them at either a national or local level - and at the moment it

seems never-ending."

Amid the cull, anger is growing - not just at short notice periods and a lack of redundancy terms being made to many of those being laid off - but also at the application of 'selection criteria' which the CWU believes may be discriminatory.

In some areas CWU agency members on a Manpower contract with many years of continuous service to BT have been selected for the axe simply on their performance, attendance and disciplinary record over a three month period from August to October last year.

"In the CWU's view, if someone has done a job continuously for a considerable number of years - as is the case with many of our agency workers - a selection process for terminations based on a three-month snapshot simply isn't on," Sally said.

Concern at the way the job cuts are being handled the length and breadth of the country has been

compounded by reports from local reps of some local managers needing to be reminded of fundamental tenets of employment law. In some areas even the statutory right to a notice period has been questioned.

Despite Manpower's insistence that it is actively seeking new assignments for those agency people laid off by BT, the CWU has taken legal advice as to why a potential redundancy situation has not led to consultation with the CWU.

On the basis of that advice, branches have already been advised that where individuals with at least two years of continuous service have not been given new assignments within four weeks of leaving BT, claims can and should be made for a redundancy payment in line with the Employment Rights Act.

As Voice went to press a special advice 'checklist' for agency members facing termination was being finalised for sending out to branches and posting on the agency page of the CWU national website (www.cwu.org).

"We're determined to ensure that where assignments are ended the process is as fair and transparent as it can possibly be - and where the selection process seems unfair or unreasonable we'll challenge it," stresses Sally.

On the wider implications of the situation currently facing agency workers, Sally added: "The present situation graphically illustrates the importance of our long-running 'Justice for Agency Workers' campaign.

"The next step in that campaign will be robust CWU involvement in the looming Government consultation covering the details of how the EU's Temporary Agency Workers Directive should be implemented in UK law."

Shock and anger at DQ job losses



Image credit: Janina Struk

Dismayed: Cathy Jackman

Agency staff and BT contract holders at the Directory Enquiries (DQ) centre in Exeter have been united in shock and anger over BT's announcement to close the workstream.

It is agency workers who will bear the brunt of the decision, however, with no less than 40 - many with years of continuous service to BT - being told their assignments will come to an end in two phases.

Those with less than two years service will be shown the door at the end of this month - while those with more than two years service will leave at the end of March.

Around 40 of their directly employed colleagues, meanwhile, are being transferred to Customer Repair work on the same site - but it is not just in Exeter that members in DQ are hurting.

Across BT's other DQ sites another 30 Manpower assignments are also being terminated - a process which is proving extremely painful because individuals - often just a few in each workplace - are being selected on the basis of their attendance, conduct and performance records (see adjoining story).

Some selections are already being appealed. South Wales Operator & Ancillary secretary Cathy Jackman cited one case where a member with a disability had been told her assignment was to be terminated, even though the attendance gaps the union believes led to her selection stemmed directly from that disability.

Cathy concludes: "We know the work has been declining in DQ for some time, but there's a lot of anger because members feel BT has done very little to address the situation."

Rising charges and a lack of advertising - especially compared to competitors like 118 188 - have, members believe, led to an inevitable decline which is now leading to agency workers - some with up to eight years of continuous service - being "unceremoniously dumped".

"Our members working on agency contracts were always hoping there would be a permanent job for them at the end of the day," stresses Cathy. "Even though BT contracts were few and far between there was always that glimmer of hope - and for them the news is earth-shattering."

InBrief

Recognition at Monterey?

CWU representatives have reached agreement with Monterey on representation at national and regional forums. The company has also agreed to meet the union to give a definitive response on the question of voluntary recognition in July 2009. "The negotiating team is minded to accept this offer on the basis that it is an advancement on the current state of affairs, gives the CWU input into discussions with the company across Britain, and also provides a valuable six month window in which to build for any recognition campaign," said Simon Sapper, assistant secretary. More at www.cwu.org/monteray/

Pay talks open at COLT

Pay talks had just opened with COLT as Voice went to press - with the CWU once again intent on securing a rise for all members at the company's Powergate division in Acton. While the CWU opposes in principle COLT's company-wide performance-related pay formula, in the three years since recognition was secured at the small Powergate bargaining unit, union negotiators have managed to ensure that no-one in that unit has gone without an increase. "That will be our minimum requirement for a negotiated settlement in what is certain to be a difficult pay round this year," said assistant secretary Sally Bridge.

Telereal acquisition

The CWU has welcomed news that Telereal is set to enhance its place in the premiership league of property management by exchanging contracts to purchase leading property partnerships company Trillium. Telereal and CWU have enjoyed a good relationship since the company's creation in 2002. Assistant secretary Simon Sapper said: "Taking over a much larger company confirms the strength and leadership of Telereal. We look forward to early talks - starting tomorrow - on the shape of the new, larger company, which will build on our valuable relationship." More at www.cwu.org/telereal/

Ultimate public service...

CWU member Tim Baxter turned good Samaritan when he saw a distressed pensioner trying to wave down cars on a busy Yorkshire road. Retired police officer Jim Lowe had pulled over on the A19 near Selby after suffering a heart attack. His frantic efforts to flag down a passing motorist were failing, however, with even a police patrol car passing by before Tim pulled over to help. He immediately called 999 and stayed by Mr Lowe's side providing desperately needed reassurance. At hospital Mr Lowe's heart stop beating and he needed to be resuscitated seven times, but he has since made a good recovery. The two men were reunited three weeks later, giving Mr Lowe the opportunity to thank Tim for saving his life.

An agency Christmas carol for BT

'Charity should begin at home' was the central message of a group of CWU carol singers who descended on the Albert Hall just before Christmas to bring home the Dickensian reality of what static pay rates mean for BT agency staff.

Under the shadow of the Albert Memorial, the now infamous 'Power-Up for Agency Pay' campaign crack-squad demonstrated formerly unappreciated choral talents by lobbying in fine seasonal voice the thousands attending the annual BT-sponsored carol concert.

Making it anything but a silent night, the CWU choir sang a series of adapted carols including 'God bless you BT gentlemen, And can we have more pay, We've waited



Pay up Scrooge: CWU carol singers in Victorian dress outside the Royal Albert Hall

very very long, And need more dosh today.'

Many agency workers haven't received a pay rise in over four years - meaning that the good

humoured seasonal stunt had a very serious purpose.

● Full story and more pictures at www.cwu.org/btcarols/

Image credit: Louise Jefferson

TALKING POINT

Truly 'voluntary'?

The CWU's boast of no compulsory redundancies rings a little hollow with me. I am 55, I was a BT engineer for over 38 years, joined from school, have known no other employer and I worked from home in my van. At the back end of September I was informed that my job no longer existed and that my options were either to take early retirement (four days to decide) or to go to the bucket.

On weighing up the possibilities, and seeing that the jobs on offer were more than likely to be in a call centre over 20 miles away, I decided my only option was to take the early retirement package that was on offer, so on October 3 I left BT.

This did not feel very voluntary to me – and many colleagues, with similar amounts of service, have been treated similarly. Some have chosen to stay and are now faced with another cut in the early retirement package, increased travel times to and from work, six day working, and shifts early and late. So much for work-life balance!

Yes, I know that ultimately it was my decision to leave,

but you have to take your hat off to BT for the expert way I and many others were swiftly manoeuvred into a position where redundancy was the best option. The company outflanks the union yet again and we are powerless to do anything about it.

Jim Campbell

Assistant secretary Ian Cuthbert responds: "No compulsory redundancies is not a boast. It is a very real and positive aim in BT which the union has so far achieved. This is far from the actions of a powerless union. Of course I empathise with the plight of anybody working for BT who is declared surplus but there needs to be some perspective here. There are many of our members, working for agency or contract firms, who would welcome the opportunity of alternative work as opposed to their reality – redundancy (on, at best, state terms) and the dole. The advice from Head Office to anyone working for BT declared surplus is to contact the local CWU branch immediately. The branch will help to ensure that alternative job offers in BT are reasonable and are in line with current agreements. One final note, BT decide the terms for early release. The CWU has no formal input and our aim is primarily to preserve jobs."

Tension at Typetalk

With the current economic climate, the possibility of redundancies could not come at a worse time for our members. We're hoping that in the coming weeks alternatives to this can be found and in the meantime the CWU will continue to support our members in whichever way we can.

The response from members has been very constructive and we've already used this feedback to improve options available to those affected. One element we're now concentrating on is building people skills to improve their likelihood of finding alternative employment should the worst case scenario happen.

Typetalk management have been very open to suggestion and supportive of our work in a situation which must be very unfamiliar territory for themselves also. From the CWU perspective, I've been very impressed by the handling of the situation by the local branch officer Rob Alldritt and the national officer, Nigel Cotgrove. It's important for a workplace rep, such as myself, to be confident that behind the scenes my members are receiving the best treatment for their monthly subscriptions; in this case I can confirm they are and any help the reps have been able to give to members is due to the actions of Nigel and Rob and the wider CWU.

If the situation can be improved – either from a halt to job losses or increased options to members – then that is because of the work of the CWU working in partnership with Typetalk. It's in times like this that I'm relieved the union is here!"

Typetalk lead rep Jay Malone

We miss you, Will



It's with great sadness that we have to announce the sudden death of our long-term comrade and former branch officer

Will Rosser – a fervent activist and supporter of the union over many years. It is as a conference speaker, however, that most people in the wider union will remember Will.

Always speaking with great insight, ability and passion from the rostrum, people might not always have agreed with what he said, but no-one could really fault the style and feeling with which he expressed his views.

Will saw an opportunity to "retire" when BT offered a release package in 2004 and grabbed it. Selling up in the UK, he brought a place in Lardos on the island of Rhodes and set up home there, unsurprisingly making many firm friends in the ex-pat community. He

was awarded a Gold Badge for his contribution to the union that same year and was over the moon to be so honoured.

Unfortunately, due to failing health, he was unable to return to the UK as he had planned over the Christmas holidays – and it was therefore in Rhodes that Will died.

Will was buried in Lardos, Rhodes in the local cemetery on 12th January 2009. This in itself was an achievement and Will has in death set a precedent for which the ex-pat community there are grateful and who have undertaken to maintain the grave to the same high standard the Greek Orthodox church expects.

Will Rosser – friend, colleague, comrade, we'll miss you.

• A full obituary and tributes can be viewed at www.cwucentrallondon.org.uk/willrosser.htm

Laurie Smith, Central London branch

Joye of membership!

I would like to thank Tony Williams at Central London branch and Bradley Wright of Edwards Duthie Solicitors for bringing about a satisfactory end to my case against Star Amusements, following my accident in 2007.

I feel that this is testament to the fact that, although I retired from BT in 1992, I kept up my membership of the CWU. My sincere thanks to every one concerned.

Joye Sessions, Canvey Island

Lancastrian lament...

In the Central & West Lincs - Lancastrian newsletter of December 2008, I wrote an article under the title "BT Clerical" in which I referred in unflattering terms to a Neil Reid. I wish to make it clear that the article in no way was referring to Mr Neil Reid, a manager in BT Group Security, who is located at Blackburn Telephone Exchange and apologies to Mr Reid for any upset or embarrassment the article may have caused Mr Reid or his colleagues.

Heather Park, branch secretary

Remembering Ron

It is with great sadness that I have to report the death at the age of 80 of Ron Gallimore, branch secretary of the Crewe Branch of the Post Office Engineering Union (POEU) and the National Communications Union (NCU), until his retirement in 1993.

Ron had served on all the official positions in the Crewe Branch spanning over three decades, culminating in him achieving the highest award the union can bestow on its members, the Gold Badge, which was awarded to him in 1989.

Ron was also a holder of the Imperial Service Medal which was awarded to him for forty-nine years service to BT but he was more proud of his Gold Badge.

As well as being someone who

had the ultimate respect and admiration from all the members at Crewe, as well the union nationally, he was well known for his quick wit and steely determination to uphold the members' interests and to represent them at all times, which he displayed and came to the fore during the Industrial Action in 1987.

Ron was working class through and through, and proud of it! He certainly set a high standard for the rest of us to follow.

On a personal note, Ron came to me when I first joined BT in 1974 (working in the Crewe area) offering me help and assistance if ever I needed it, even though I was a Potteries Branch member. That was the sort of person Ron was.

He will be missed firstly by his family and many friends but also by the North Midlands Branch and its members.

Andrew Cawley, North Midlands

Brave stand at Fujitsu

May I take this opportunity to express my sincere thanks to Grace Mitchell and Steve Catterall for all their hard work in securing a voluntary redundancy package for the members at Fujitsu in Birmingham. Having such determined, knowledgeable and experienced people as Grace and Steve in our corner certainly caused the company to sit up and take notice. I really dread to think what would have happened if we'd had no union on site. Special thanks also to Bob Hammond and Ray Lolley who fought for us all the way and handled a thankless and stressful job with dignity and courage.

It's been a very sad time for us all and I can only hope that the members who remain at Fujitsu are treated with the respect they deserve.

Rick Cleaver, ex-Fujitsu

Protection in retirement

May I express my thanks to the union for their invaluable assistance in lodging a claim (on behalf of my wife) following the death of her mother in tragic circumstances in hospital in 2007.

As a retired member I would not have been in a position to seek redress without the union's help, but now the case has been settled to our satisfaction.

Special thanks to the Legal and Medical Dept, solicitors McCool Patterson Hems, particularly Mark Havenand (and Sharon), and to my local branch officers in Crewe.

It's really nice to know that even a long-retired member still has the protection of the CWU.

Alf Dewsbury, Northwich

Additional letters can be viewed on our website at: www.cwu.org/links/lettersextra

HALF PRICE SALE!

CWU DIARY 2009

We have a limited stock of CWU 2009 diaries that are now being offered at a special sale price. The pocket diary is now 75p (was £1.50) and the desk diary is £1.25 (was £2.50).

Send your order to: Marcia Murray, CWU, 150 The Broadway, Wimbledon, London SW19 1RX.

Please make sure you enclose a cheque or postal order made payable to CWU Diaries.

Enquiries to Marcia Murray on 020 8971 7497 or mmurray@cwu.org



Crunch hits hard as grading row rumbles on



Openreach is being hit harder than most in the current economic downturn

As the recession bites deep, companies across the telecoms industry are feeling the pinch. Openreach, however, is being hit harder than most because it thrives on a buoyant housing market and a growing small business sector – both of which have been severely impacted by the crisis.

Assistant secretary Ian Cuthbert explains: "The churn in the housing market and growth in businesses provides the bulk of the work for our membership in Openreach, as well as repairing faults.

"It's clear from everyday experience that the volumes of work on provision have plummeted. It's also true to say that repair volumes have fallen as a result of previous upgrades of the network - and competition also plays a part through the growth of wireless services and the ubiquitous dongle.

"All of this has meant that, according to Openreach, there are more people than currently available work – hence the declaration of surpluses in many localities."

Against this difficult backdrop the

CWU has initiated talks with Openreach aimed at preserving the skills and equipment members have until the economy starts to grow again. The creation of Regional Transition Centres is part of that initiative.

The union is also exploring with Openreach which outsourced workstreams could be brought back in-house and carried out by direct labour.

"Our aims are not just to avoid compulsory redundancies but to convince Openreach that the downturn, whilst challenging, can be used as an opportunity to restructure the way work is done as well as developing and equipping members for the skills challenge of the future," Ian points out.

He stresses, however, that while there has been a particular focus on saving jobs during the past couple of months, that does not mean that other issues and bones of contention are being neglected.

"It is still our belief that the current skills of many of our members are undervalued by Openreach and this needs to be rectified," said Ian.

"Until December, and the outcome of the pension talks (see story on page 4), Openreach claimed that it

could not fully progress with the grading talks since any outcome could impact of the cost of pensions.

"Whilst there was some truth in this, that excuse for not progressing has gone and the CWU Executive has reminded Openreach at a very senior level that there needs to be a resolution to the many grading anomalies within this financial year."

The reason Openreach must budge on the grading issue, Ian stresses, is stark and simple. "Openreach will only survive if it takes its workforce with it," he explains – but to do so means the company must recognise the very unique breadth of skills many employees hold.

"We're aware of the cost pressures on all companies but it's a false saving to undervalue the workforce," Ian concludes. "We hope Openreach recognises both the moral and commercial imperative in paying people a salary that truly reflects their skills. It can do this through the regrading exercise and by rectifying previous anomalies such as academy coaches, on-site designers, multi-skilled engineers and so on."

● As Voice went to press meetings were being arranged to recommence the grading discussions as well as dealing with potential further surpluses

Second Global profit warning



Keeping close tabs: Colin O'Callaghan

The CWU has urgently sought reassurances from BT Global Services following the second successive trading update given to the Stock Exchange in two financial quarters.

The first trading update, reported in the last issue of Voice, stemmed from the division's under-performance against market expectations. The most recent update came as a result of the financial, contract and operational reviews instigated by the new chief executive, Hanif Lalani.

"Those reviews have resulted in BT Global Services, and therefore BT, taking a circa £340 million hit on their financial accounts. There may also be further hits on the financial accounts in this quarter as the reviews continue," said assistant secretary Colin O'Callaghan.

While the potential impact on members of the second trading update remains unclear, Colin stressed the union is pressing the company to reinforce its commitment to open up opportunities for redeployees by continuing to reduce its reliance on contractors and consultants.

"Our immediate demand is absolute adherence to the long-established agreements between us in dealing with change," said Colin, who will be meeting with BT management to gain a clearer picture ahead of the third quarter results due later in this month.

Global Services is seen as BT's growth engine in the absence of a mobile arm. The first trading update resulted from Global Services failing to fulfil that role. The second warning implies that a small number of Global Services' large contracts are not as profitable as first thought, and there may be more bad news to come – which has negatively impacted BT's share price.

The situation has resulted in an unprecedented accelerated change programme within Global Services affecting a significant number of CWU members. "Many have found themselves redeployees searching for alternative roles in BT," said Colin. "The union is determined to use existing agreements to ensure that maximum protection is afforded for our members as they face this period of unprecedented change."

O₂ pay talks get off to sour start

Historically, the beginning of February is the time that pay talks begin in O₂ – and negotiations are always tough. This year, however, a long shadow has been cast over them from the outset in the form of a row with O₂ over recognition and facilities for members of the lay national negotiating committee.

CWU national officer Ian Cuthbert explains: "Since the summer of last year, the CWU has been changing its structure so that all decisions affecting members in O₂ are taken exclusively by

representatives employed by O₂. This has taken some time to do, but we did not expect the kind of reaction from O₂."

The CWU national negotiating committee is made up of six people representing the four Customer Service sites plus representatives from Retail and Technology. They report to a wider body of elected delegates, all of whom must be employed in O₂. The company, however, has challenged some of the representatives on the committee.

"It is a crude argument about whether the union chooses its representatives or the company does," said Ian. "I am sure O₂ would like the latter but that is not going to happen. Frankly this is a distraction and one which is not worthy of a responsible management."

Urgent talks are going on between the CWU and O₂ to remove this unwanted company intrusion into CWU affairs and to get on with the serious business of protecting members' incomes.



Unimpressed by O₂ "distraction": Ian Cuthbert

Typetalk cuts will hurt the vulnerable, BT told

The CWU is calling on BT to halt plans to cut the funding of the text relay service for deaf people and hearing impaired provided by Typetalk.

The cuts, initiated by BT in a bid to reduce the cost of its universal service obligation (USO) to provide such a service, will lead to the closure of the marketing unit that is designed to promote the service to the deaf and hearing-impaired community and provide individual assistance to users. The proposed cuts put 15 jobs at risk.

Deputy general secretary Andy Kerr told the Voice: "The cuts will

reduce the level of service provided to this vulnerable section of society. BT should immediately halt the cuts to allow a proper debate with Ofcom about the marketing of the Typetalk service.

"Having a text relay service, but no mechanism to market, it makes a mockery of the USO."

CWU national official Nigel Cotgrove added: "There are no clear commitments from either BT or other operators to market the service in future. We have no confidence that the Typetalk service will be marketed at all. BT's cuts not only threaten the jobs of

dedicated staff at Typetalk in the next few weeks, but also put the long-term success of the Typetalk operation at risk."

While BT has responded to the union's concerns by downplaying the likely impact of the move, the CWU remains unconvinced and, as such, is continuing to lobby both BT and Ofcom.

Amid considerable nervousness amongst CWU Liverpool Clerical branch members at Typetalk's Merseyside headquarters, Typetalk lead rep Jay Malone told the Voice: "With the current economic climate, the possibility of

redundancy could not come at a worse time for our members. We're hoping that in the coming weeks alternatives to this can be found and in the meantime the CWU will continue to support our members in whichever way we can.

"If the situation can be improved – either from a halt to job losses or increased options to members – then that is because of the work of the CWU working in partnership with Typetalk. It's in times like this that I'm relieved the union is here!"

● Full story at www.cwu.org/typetalkcuts/ and letter on page 6

NEW YEAR – AND BIG NEW CHALLENGES

With evidence mounting by the day that the global economic downturn is hitting the UK hard, 2009 is already shaping up to be a challenging year across the telecoms and financial services (T&FS) sector. Against a backdrop of job losses and corporate belt tightening, deputy general secretary (T&FS) **Andy Kerr** outlines the challenges the CWU will have to rise to in 2009. **Simon Alford** reports...

You don't need a degree in economics to see that the credit crunch that brought the banking industry to the brink of meltdown last autumn has moved into a worrying new phase.

News of job losses across the telecoms sector just before Christmas – including 10,000 at BT – was one of the first indicators that what was initially a crisis affecting the financial world is now claiming victims across the 'real' economy.

The simultaneous announcement of large-scale redundancies in Virgin Media and YELL has now been followed by news of significant job cuts on the way at Alliance & Leicester, Sitel and Tynetalk. Meanwhile a major shakeout of agency workers is already underway in BT as the company seeks to reduce its headcount by targeting those who have the weakest employment rights.

For a union like the CWU – the entire raison d'être of which is to defend and promote job security and the terms and conditions of members – the darkening economic outlook throws up some difficult challenges.

Already it's clear that heightened attempts by employers to cut back on costs – which inevitably means pressure on headcounts – and to maximise productivity will exacerbate the challenges already posed by the technological revolution that is already changing the face of the telecoms sector.

Meanwhile in financial services the ongoing process of amalgamation in banking has itself been accelerated by the credit crunch.

The woes of once mighty institutions like Northern Rock, HBOS and the Royal Bank of Scotland might have briefly provided a comforting rationale for the takeover of Alliance & Leicester by Santander...yet the perceived security of being part of one of Europe's largest banks was seriously dented last month with the announcement of major job losses.

With the combined Santander group looking to make more than 2,000 job losses across its combined A&L, Abbey and Bradford and Bingley operations, the CWU's A&L membership has just had to swallow the bitter pill that 1,000 of the redundancies will fall within their part of the new group. (See story on page 3)

With trouble and uncertainty on so



▲ Above: Deputy general secretary (telecoms) Andy Kerr

► Main image: Troubled economic waters have added new challenges to those the union was already preparing to tackle in 2009

many fronts, it's already clear that any hopes that the successful conclusion of negotiations on BT Pensions (see story on page 4) that dominated the latter part of 2008 would pave the way for a quieter start to 2009 have been unceremoniously blown out the water.

"There's no doubt that as we enter 2009 the CWU's telecoms and financial services department is facing an unprecedented number of challenges on a whole variety of fronts," deputy general secretary (T&FS) Andy Kerr told the Voice.

"These range from job losses to pay in all the companies where we have recognition (see stories on news pages), because there's no doubt in my mind that the 2009 pay round is going to be one of the hardest to call and toughest to negotiate in years.

"But it doesn't end there because there are a whole range of challenges that are specific to the various companies in which we have members.

"In BT, for instance, there are a raft of inter-related issues surrounding BT's resourcing plans, the rollout of next generation Broadband and the skills challenge that needs to be addressed to ensure that CWU members don't get left behind as BT transforms itself into a software-driven services company.

"These, and a whole range of other challenges, look set to make 2009 a very busy year indeed," Andy stresses.

BT JOB LOSSES

BT's aim to reduce its headcount by 10,000 by the end of March is certain to be a dominant theme in talks with the company over the coming weeks.

CWU negotiators have already demanded and received unequivocal guarantees that there will be no compulsory redundancies of directly employed workers, but the way in which agency workers are being affected is already becoming a bone of contention.

Just before Christmas Andy Kerr wrote to BT expressing the union's "anger and extreme disappointment at the minimal notice given to a hundreds of agency members that their contracts were being terminated." (See full story on page 5)

"Whilst BT may not have a contractual responsibility for these individuals our view is that it has a clear moral responsibility for them," Andy explained.



Alluding to the ongoing Justice for Agency Workers campaign – that will continue to be a major priority for the union in 2009 – Andy pointed out: "Agency workers are an extremely vulnerable section of the workforce, on lower pay than their permanent counterparts, with little or no job security and scant entitlement to redundancy terms."

In total around 6,000 of the 10,000 jobs BT wants to shed are expected to be agency workers, contractors and consultants – but Andy stresses that the union will not be letting up in its drive for the 'conversion' of as many agency staff as possible into permanent BT employees.

Under the Sourcing Strategy Agreement the union signed with BT Retail in 2006 the company committed to a 90:10 permanent to agency resourcing model, but CWU concerns have persisted that the ratio has still not been reached in some areas.

SKILLS CHALLENGE

Intrinsically linked to the wider question of resourcing at BT is the crucial question of how the company will equip its workforce with the new skills that will increasingly be required as the BT Transformation process continues.

The CWU is determined to ensure that members displaced from their current roles by technological advance and the changing nature of the business are given the opportunity to participate fully in any new opportunities that arise – and re-skilling is the key.

Talks are already in progress about how the newly named BT Transition Centre (BTTC) will work in practice – details of which urgently need finalising with the number of displaced individuals continuing to rise.

"Displacement is happening throughout the company – not just in engineering," stresses Andy Kerr. "As the 21st Century Network comes in the whole idea will be for people to access



Image credits: Howard Burns

their bills, and to do many of the other things they currently ring BT's call centres for, via the internet.

"That doesn't mean that jobs will necessarily go – but the work being conducted by some of the people currently working in call centres will be entirely different – some of it higher skilled.

"We see skills as a huge issue because we don't think BT has yet moved far enough to utilise the skills our people have got. Moving displaced highly-skilled switch engineers into call centre work, for example, is not making the best use of their talents and we would expect BT to be re-skilling them in the work of the future. (See letters page)

"We've been strongly arguing that point with the company, but I don't think the company has quite yet appreciated what a big job this is going to be."

The union is forcefully making the case that in order to provide the world-

“**MOVING DISPLACED HIGH-SKILLED ENGINEERS IN TO CALL CENTRE WORK IS NOT MAKING THE BEST USE OF THEIR TALENTS**”

class customer service on which BT's future will ultimately depend, the company must not skimp on the level of retraining it gives.

"We're making the point that there is money available from Government to assist companies in this process, and we'd expect BT to use that, whenever possible, to give our people the skills of the future which are generally more IT-based than traditional telecoms-based.

"The CWU believes there's a role in this that could be played by union learning centres, and we've already made the offer to work together on that with the assistance of the union's education department. There's the potential of a real 'win-win' situation here.

"In the past BT has often brought people in from the outside to do IT work – and now some of those contractors and consultants are amongst those who will go as a result of the 10,000 job losses. I think BT has accepted that it is

going to have to reskill its own people to do that work because it's the easiest way to address the challenge. Paying directly employed people to leave the company and then paying heavily to bring in people from the outside to do the work is economic madness.

"I think we're winning the argument on this point - the challenge now is to get BT to move to the next stage and start putting reskilling processes in place. That is something we hope we should be able to do in the next few months."

NEXT GENERATION BROADBAND

As well as pressing BT to tackle the skills challenge with boldness and imagination the CWU will be lobbying hard this year to try to ensure that plans for a major national investment in 'next generation broadband' don't get blown off course by the economic downturn.

"Already there's been speculation that given the credit crunch BT may be backtracking on the £1.5 billion investment that Ian Livingstone announced late last year," explains Andy Kerr.

"We've got to try make sure the £1.5 billion is actually put in place. I'm going to be arguing, not just with BT but also with the Government, that this is a time when we should be investing even more – not less.

"We do have to ensure, however, that the huge amount of work that will be created replacing the copper network with fibre is work that is done by directly employed BT people – our members – rather than outside contractors...and again this feeds back into the need for reskilling.

As Voice went to press Andy had just raised the issue in the presence of Gordon Brown at the January meeting of Labour Party's National Executive Committee.

MANAGEMENT STYLE

Another key Telecoms Executive priority for 2009 is securing a group-level agreement which addresses the union's inter-related concerns about performance management and management style in BT.

Amid escalating concern about problems which have become especially acute in parts of Openreach and BT Retail, just before Christmas the CWU secured a board-level commitment to talks.

As Voice went to press the first meeting was about to take place – with preliminary indications suggesting that there is a high level of agreement on what the performance management process should look like.

"I'm confident we can get an agreement on the process – it's how it's implemented that will determine

whether it really gets to grips with the problems CWU members are facing in some areas," explains Andy Kerr.

"As far as I'm concerned the problems we're facing in this area are more about management style than anything else – rogue managers interpreting the current procedures in a perverse way.

"When we look at the divisions where the majority of problems are originating – notably Openreach and BT Retail – you find that it's not every exchange area or every call centre where difficulties are arising.

"The key to solving this problem therefore would seem to be fixing what is essentially a breakdown in communications. What we've said to the company is that we need short, direct, clear messages that cannot be misinterpreted as they are filtered down."

Commenting on the particular problem in Openreach, Andy was hopeful that recent changes in senior management would prove decisive in diffusing a climate of fear that has built up in some areas.

"John Small's appointment as managing director of Service Delivery is especially welcome, as we know him to be a person who believes strongly in a good management style and that once he gives his word on something he'll stick to it."

RELATIONSHIP WITH O₂

Despite predicting a difficult pay round at O₂ (see story on page 7), deputy general secretary Andy Kerr is hopeful that a significant thaw in union/ company relations throughout 2008 will continue to be cemented in 2009.

"There are still some outstanding issues, notably over bank holiday working, but I think last year's pay talks showed that where there is a willingness to talk and negotiate the result is in everyone's best interests.

"We have a very strong membership in O₂ and our members really trust us to defend their interests. We're highly organised in the four big call centres, but I'd like to see us build on that membership in 2009. I'd especially like to see us build on our membership in the shops – which is the lowest paid part of the organisation.

RECRUITMENT AND ORGANISING

There's strength in numbers, the old saying goes - and that truism underpins a renewed determination across the telecoms and financial services department to maximise memberships in every possible area.

Bolstered by the fact that the CWU now has 15 full-time organisers – more than at any time in the union's history – plans are being drawn up to step up organising and recruitment activity ▶

FEATURE WEATHERING THE STORM

across both the union's long-established strongholds and the companies where only partial – or no – recognition agreements exist.

"In BT we need to keep the high levels of membership we already have. In O₂ we need to do the same and in the O₂ shops we need to recruit," explains Andy Kerr.

"In Monteray we need to continue building membership – not just in the parts of the company where we used to have recognition prior to their amalgamation into one national body – but across the whole company with the ultimate aim of getting recognition across the board.

Organising activity is similarly going to be stepped up in Virgin Media, with the aim of building on strong membership foundation in the former Telewest parts of the business, while making new inroads into parts of the businesses that were formerly NTL. (See story on page 3)

A&L

As Voice went to press the CWU was engaged in detailed discussions with Alliance & Leicester to establish how the 2,000 job losses planned for the combined Santander Group of companies will fall in the UK. (See story on page 3)

With around 1,000 of the job losses expected to fall in Alliance & Leicester – representing about 12 per cent of the workforce – tensions are understandably running high and CWU negotiators are braced for some busy months ahead.

Yet, once the dust has settled on the immediate fallout of Santander's takeover, a new and arguably bigger challenge faces the CWU – namely how to maintain the influence the union has with A&L in the context of what is expected to be its gradual

“**THE NEXT FEW YEARS ARE CLEARLY GOING TO BE HARD IN FINANCIAL SERVICES AND PEOPLE WILL BE LOOKING FOR A STRONG UNION TO REPRESENT THEM**”

amalgamation into a group which now includes three UK banks.

While under no illusion about the scale of the task that lies ahead, deputy general secretary Andy Kerr is upbeat about the longer-term potential for the CWU to become a major player in what is certain to become one of the UK's biggest banks.

"We shouldn't forget that we are a financial services union, and this is an area where there is huge potential to expand our membership and influence," Andy told the Voice.

"Having already merged with ALGUS, the CWU is now by far and away the largest union in A&L. For historical reasons PCS is also involved in parts of the company but, now that the dynamic has changed, I'd like to hope that discussions could open with PCS to see if they think the comparatively small number of members they have in A&L would be better served if they were in the CWU.

"I'd also hope that further down the line we start talking to the unions in Abbey and Bradford & Bingley to see if there is potential for close working between our organisations."

"There are no 'no-go' areas for me in Financial Services. If we are seen to be doing a good job for our members in A&L – and I think our members in A&L would already say that has been the case over many years – that will put us in a very strong position.

"The next few years are clearly going to be hard in the financial services arena, and I think that people will be looking for a strong trade union to represent them."

IPSL

While assurances have already been received from Santander that the massive Alliance & Leicester site at Bootle on Merseyside is not at risk of closure in the current rationalisation, the future of the neighbouring IPSL cheque processing operation is less certain. With cheque volumes falling by around 10 per cent a year, IPSL's Merseyside workforce has already shrunk from 800 to 350.

Even prior to the Santander arriving on the scene the looming expiry of iPSL's cheque processing contract with A&L in 2010 was causing nervousness – and now the takeover has added to the uncertainty as Abbey has its own cheque processing operation.

"The takeover has created more questions over the future as there is the possibility that Santander might want to take a completely different approach to cheque processing," explains Andy.

Andy is convinced that the CWU cannot just sit back and see what happens, stressing that the union will be doing "all it can to bring new work into the Bootle site."

For years iPSL section secretary Gerry Culligan has been pleading with iPSL to diversify, suggesting that a range of document-processing options – from airline ticket handling to the sorting of NHS prescriptions – could sit well alongside the cheque processing operation.

"Gerry's been absolutely right for years – and if the company had listened to what he had to say and responded earlier maybe we wouldn't be in the situation we're in now," stresses Andy.

"The plain fact is that with several hundred jobs at risk in this part of Liverpool – a disaster in anyone's books – it's looking more and more likely that we're going to have to take up this argument with Government."

IMPROVING SERVICE TO MEMBERS

Within the CWU itself, an ongoing drive to promote 'best practice' at branch level will continue to be a priority in 2009 – the most immediate aim being to get a new web-based 'knowledge centre' up and running.

"This will provide branches with a tremendous resource that will allow them to share information and experiences. The hope is that by posting useful information and honest assessments as to whether initiatives

have been successes or failures it will help other branches emulate successful projects and hopefully avoid mistakes being repeated," said Andy Kerr.

"At the end of the day this is all about improving the service we give to members at a branch level."

Andy's intention in 2009, however, is to take the 'best

practice' initiative to the national level by initiating a review as to whether the way in which the Telecoms and Financial Services Executive (TFSE) currently works can be improved upon.

"I don't think we should shy away from some soul-searching, because while there are some things that we do bloody well that doesn't mean that there's no room for improvement in others," he said.

"I'm on record as saying that that the 'constituency' system we currently operate is a 1960s/ 1970s way of working and that we should strongly consider moving towards having just one telecoms & financial services constituency.

"We need to have a radical look at ourselves, be honest about the areas where we could do things better – and then be prepared to change." ▼

SITEL SHOCKER

Desperate times at Sitel as company warns of hundreds of job losses...

As Voice went to press CWU negotiators were consulting with branches on a fast-deteriorating situation at Sitel where the union is now braced for a major job loss announcement.

Against an unremittingly bleak backdrop, which includes the expected announcement of site closures, CWU national negotiators made the difficult decision to recommend to branches that talks on the 2009 pay round should be temporarily suspended.

Assistant secretary Sally Bridge told the Voice: "Sitel has been open and frank about the issues the company is facing, and whilst we've made it clear that the CWU is not in the business of agreeing job losses or site closures, we've been persuaded that the challenges outlined to us are real and that the company is in a very serious situation.

"The job security of members is quite rightly the paramount concern of any trade union – and in this unprecedented situation we've concluded that it would be counter-productive to continue seeking an immediate pay rise. The company has, however, agreed to review the situation in six months time."

Sitel, which conducts broadband technical helpdesk for BT has been hard hit by BT's drive to reduce its headcount by 10,000 by the end of March. Its position as a provider of outsourced call centre services, and the level of its exposure to BT – by far and away its major client in the UK – has made it especially vulnerable to cutbacks being sought by BT in the current economic downturn.

▼ Below: Santander's current advertising campaign omits to mention that 1,000 jobs are to go at A&L – hence this altered image! Full job cuts story on page 3



Image credit: Howard Burns

Harnessing Facebook for recruitment



Exploring new frontiers: Sarah Connolly

A CWU organiser working in Wales has found that Facebook can be a good way to get access to potential members in areas where we have had limited success in the past.

Sarah Connolly, a new organiser for Wales and the Marches, set up a Facebook site for workers at T-mobile in Merthyr Tydfil and already has 460 new friends. There are around 490 people working at the site.

The CWU has been able to sign up new members through Facebook, several of whom have expressed an interest in becoming reps or activists.

"The potential of Facebook as a recruitment tool is huge," said Sarah, who admits to trying all the traditional paths to recruit at the site without great success. "The problem is that at many of the sites I visit

people are driving in and there is no opportunity to strike up a dialogue. Facebook helps me overcome this obstacle. Now people are talking to me on Facebook, asking about the union and showing a real interest."

As such Sarah believes that Facebook offers a real opportunity to reach potential members. "You can be standing outside companies where there is no recognition with limited success. Facebook offers a new way in," explains Sarah, who thinks the same type of tactics may be used with other non-unionised employers in Wales.

"This is a growing community now. I now have friends from 118 118 and the non-recognised side of Virgin Media and I'm speaking with them and encouraging them on a regular

basis", added Sarah.

It is important to note, however, that while Facebook is a useful tool for organising and recruiting it has to be used appropriately. Bernie Leonard, branch secretary of Alliance & Leicester Giro South, notes: "It can be an excellent tool to promote the union but members must always keep in mind that anyone could be looking in to the public areas, including managers."

Sarah agrees, "Of course it has to be handled responsibly but the real value of Facebook, from an organising perspective, is in the private dialogue that can be opened up with people who get in touch with me and I am able to develop a relationship with potential members.

"It's all about strategy."

ON THE WEB

View these Postal edition stories online at: www.cwu.org/voice

■ **Backing for people's bank**
CWU general secretary Billy Hayes and deputy general secretary Dave Ward will represent the union at the Westminster launch of a new campaign for an expanded Post Office People's Bank later this month. "Post Office People's Bank can play a key role in fighting financial exclusion, restoring our economy and protecting and expanding jobs," explained Dave,

and Billy added: "We'll be making the case that People's Bank has got to be the right way forward, for our members and for the UK as a whole."



Smooth operators win £1 million

A 17 strong syndicate working for BT's Operator Services in Glasgow have scooped a £1 million prize in the National Lottery.

Known as the 'Smooth Operators', the syndicate of CWU members has been buying tickets for 14 years. They will now each net £64,344.47 from the win.

Vivienne Allison, who has been buying the team's tickets for the past nine years at the city's Barmulloch Post Office, recalled how members of the syndicate had, just a few days prior to the win, been discussing not winning anything over the years. "I had the afternoon off for shopping and got a call from one of the girls saying we had won," said Vivienne. "I didn't believe it but then I got another call saying it was definitely six numbers. I ended up screaming in the car park."

Vivienne will spend her win proceeds on paying off her



The 'Smooth Operators' celebrating their win

mortgage and buying a present for her son. "One of the girls is buying a kitchen, another is going on holiday,"

said Vivienne, who confirmed the 'Smooth Operators' will be continuing to do the lottery.

Quality mark for Northallerton

The 'Come With Us and Learn' centre in Northallerton, run jointly by BT and the CWU, has received the Matrix Quality Mark – a registered trademark of the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills.

BT chief procurement officer Neil Rogers and CWU activist John Blevins received the award from Rosie Winterton, minister of state, at the Houses of Parliament in London.

John said: "The centre runs IT courses for carers - they had nowhere else to go in North Yorkshire and they have been coming to the centre for nearly three years.

"We have also run day events – a learning at work day, a silver surfers day, and taster courses including Indian cooking and 'ai chi."

The centre is located at the once threatened BT procurement site in Northallerton.

Rosie Winterton commented: "We are absolutely delighted for all involved in this marvellous achievement. Congratulations on the well-deserved recognition that you have worked so hard to achieve at Northallerton."

Reliance security staff are also on site and have aided and benefitted from the centre.

Assistant secretary Simon Sapper commented: "This is a good news for CWU, BT and RSSL. Hopefully Reliance nationally will take note!"



John Blevins and Rosie Winterton

■ MPs rally to fight Mail Betrayal

Business Secretary Peter Mandelson's proposals to part-privatise Royal Mail have provoked furious opposition from backbenchers – from across the political divide – threatening the Government with the biggest Parliamentary rebellion since the Iraq invasion. An Early Day Motion (EDM) from Morecambe and Lunesdale MP Geraldine Smith, urging Prime Minister Gordon Brown to "reject the recommendation of

the Hooper Report to sell a minority stake in Royal Mail" has been signed by well over 100 Members.



Learning boost in Southampton



John Denham cuts the ribbon

Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills John Denham MP has formally opened the Southampton Learning Terminal. This is the second union learning centre set up by the CWU's Solent branch, which has already delivered over 300 learning opportunities to members and the wider community through its original learning centre - the Bournemouth-based 'Learning Exchange'.

The new learning centre, situated within Southampton's Nursling BT Telephone Engineering Centre, is equipped with new computer equipment which has been funded in part by Solent Branch, matched

by funding from the CWU Sustainability Fund. Courses are free wherever possible and provide nationally recognised qualifications. The first course, which started last month, allows learners to brush up on their maths skills through digital photography, and provides an opportunity to gain a nationally recognised qualification in maths.

John Denham noted: "The key issue is how to get people whose first experience has not been brilliant back into learning."

● For more information on the learning opportunities available email learning@cwusolent.org or call lead ULR Dave Thompson on 01202 525376. Full story at www.cwu.org/SLT/

■ Walk speeds - the facts

Postal delivery workers' walk speeds hit the headlines just before Christmas, after CWU members complained that Royal Mail bosses were bullying and harassing staff for not walking their rounds quickly enough. Voice investigates the facts behind the spin and talks to CWU assistant secretary Bob Gibson about how conflict over this issue could be avoided in the future.



Non – Executive Board Members UIA (Insurance) Ltd

UIA is a mutual insurance company with over 100 years' experience of providing great value, high quality general insurance to members of selected trade unions and other not-for-profit organisations.

We are now seeking applications from UIA household policyholders to add value to UIA and join the Board as Non-Executive Directors. Candidates should be able to demonstrate a proven track record of success in their field and have an understanding and empathy with the objectives of the trade union movement. A sound understanding of corporate governance would be advantageous.

The required time commitment will be approximately 2 days per month and remuneration is currently £7,500 per annum. Applications should be by submission of your curriculum vitae and a supporting letter demonstrating your suitability for the role to Christine Kraina at the e-mail address below, or write to UIA (Insurance) Ltd, Kings Court, London Road, Stevenage, Herts, SG1 2TP. Closing date for applications will be 6th March 2009.

If you would like further information about the role, please contact Christine Kraina on:

01438 761700 or email

christine.kraina@uia.co.uk

For more information about

UIA please visit **www.uia.co.uk**.



INFORMATION

FORMAL NOTICE

ELECTION OF:

CWU Assistant Secretary – Legal Services

CWU National Executive Council & NATIONAL REPRESENTATIVE POSITIONS - 2009

This is formal notification of the election of the **Assistant Secretary – Legal Services**. The position will be the subject of election this spring in accordance with the CWU national rule that requires election every 5 years. The NEC has approved the timetable which is set out below.

Assistant Secretary – Legal Services

Elected every 5 years by all members

The responsibilities of all Assistant Secretaries shall be to carry out and discharge under the direction of the GS such Union duties as they may be deemed required to perform.

The election for the above position will be run concurrently with the 2009 **National Executive Council and National Representative** elections.

The timetable for all of the above elections, as approved by the NEC, is set out below

Nominations open 16 February 2009

Nominations close 9 March 2009 (14:00)

Accept nominations (where applicable) 12 March 2009 (14:00)

Despatch of ballot material from* 7 April 2009

Ballot closes first post 27 April 2009

Result declared 29 April 2009

**please note that ballot papers will be sent to all eligible members who are included in the membership register maintained by the union as at 6 March 2009. Therefore any changes of address etc will need to have been received at CWU HQ prior to this date.*

The independent scrutineer appointed by the union to oversee the ballot arrangements is Electoral Reform Services. The election regulations can be found on the CWU Web Site or copies can be obtained from your local branch. Any enquiries regarding the above elections should be addressed to Tony Kearns, Senior Deputy General Secretary, CWU HQ.

'Real skills' must be developed

CWU general secretary Billy Hayes has called for more access to real skills development for vulnerable workers. Addressing a Manchester-based Union Learning Reps workshop, Billy expressed his concern about cuts being made to funding for adult learning.

Billy told how the latest intake of learning reps were made up of 36 per cent ethnic minorities, 30 per cent women and 18 per cent under 30s.

"Education develops both individual self-confidence and the collective self-confidence we need as a union to be able to fight BT, Royal Mail, O₂ and, when necessary, the Government," said Billy.

Another speaker raised a cheer when he urged the Government to "stop talking about Train to Gain and start thinking about 'Train the Brain!'"

CWU North West regional secretary Carl Webb spoke movingly of his own learning journey and how union learning had supported "people like me, who have dyslexia."

● More at www.cwu.org/realskills/



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Northeast members repel BNP



CWU activists taking the 'vote Labour' message to within yards of their BNP opponents

A big mobilisation by CWU members in the Northeast helped ensure that the electoral threat of the BNP was repelled and Labour Party candidate Henry Nicholson emerged victorious as a local councillor.

CWU member Henry gained 252 votes beating his BNP opponent into

third place with 239 votes in the Shildon council election in Bishop Auckland. Henry's fellow Labour party running-mate got 240 votes, winning the second of the two positions up for grabs.

Henry explained how the BNP had put a lot of effort into the election in

the area, running a local stall for a month and having party leader Nick Griffin coming to town. During his visit the BNP leader peddled the line that the party is not racist but merely opposed to immigration.

"The CWU mobilised and it was only as a result of that action that we were able to win," said Henry, who was particularly grateful to Newcastle Amal branch secretary John Woodhouse, Telecoms & Financial Services Executive member Dave Dukes, John Blevins, Alan Twiddall and Phil Graham.

"I'm indebted for the financial and moral support of the CWU," Henry told the Voice.

"Without the union's help I would not have secured the victory."

In addition to running a stall on the Saturday before the election, Henry estimates that 1,500 houses were leafleted by his intrepid team of volunteers.

Branch secretary John Woodhouse concludes: "It shows what a few helping hands on the day can do.

"It's a good victory and Henry deserves congratulations."

Women reconvene in NI

The newly re-activated Northern Ireland (NI) Regional Women's Committee held its inaugural annual general meeting in Belfast amid high hopes for greater involvement of the CWU's female membership across the region. National equality officer Linda Roy hailed the revival of the committee - which has been inactive for some years - as "an important development for women in Northern Ireland and the union as a whole as all regions now have women's committees."

NI regional secretary Lawrence Huston told of his delight at the development. "It's obviously vital for the region to have the committee fully functioning again as there are many issues today across all constituencies that have a direct impact on our women members," he said.

The newly-appointed NI Regional Women's Committee chair is Pamela Johnston and Vivien Holding is committee secretary.

● They can be contacted on 02890212031 or via e-mail: vivien.holding@bt.com

InBrief

Digital plan welcomed

The CWU has strongly welcomed the Government's 'Digital Britain' Interim Report which sets out ambitious plans for universal access to broadband. The union believes the proposal should secure jobs in the telecoms sector as well as tackling the digital divide. Deputy general secretary Andy Kerr said: "At a time of huge job losses these recommendations promise to boost growth, create employment opportunities...but we need timely Government action to ensure that UK jobs and skills are in place to deliver this vision."

Unpaid overtime rife

More than five million people worked unpaid overtime in 2008, bringing its total value across the UK to a record £26.9 billion. Amid growing economic gloom and fear of job losses, TUC general secretary Brendan Barber warned against the creation of workplace environments where staff "compete for who can stay the latest" - urging bosses to focus instead on real productivity gains.

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GENERAL NEWS

£35,000 boost for ALMA Hospital

A hospital serving a desperately poor rural community in Northern Pakistan will be able to provide free health care to thousands for three months, thanks to a fundraiser in Parliament organised by former UCW deputy general secretary Tony Clarke – now Lord Clarke of Hampstead.

On January 9 more than 100 people attended the charity dinner at the House of Lords to raise money for the ALMA Hospital Trust (AHT) – the charity founded by Watford postman Mohammed Younis in memory of his beloved mother who succumbed to leukaemia in 1980. The £35,000 – raised by ticket sales, a charity auction and a couple of big one-off donations – means the AHT can pay the hospital's six doctors and 16 full-time nurses up to June.

Overwhelmed by the generosity of all those who have contributed to the AHT over the years – Younis stresses continuing support is vital whilst he lobbies the Pakistani authorities to take over the hospital's running costs.

● Full story at www.cwu.org/aht-lords/

Solidarity with Gaza



Protesters in Jerusalem show their solidarity

CWU general secretary Billy Hayes welcomed last month's ceasefire that brought to an end Israel's three-week invasion of Gaza, during which over 1,000 Palestinians were killed.

But, with 4,000 buildings destroyed and 20,000 severely damaged, leaving 50,000 people homeless and almost a third of Gaza's 1.5 million people with no running water, aid is urgently needed.

To assist the humanitarian effort in Gaza, the CWU has given its full backing to the emergency financial appeal launched by TUC Aid and Billy has urged people to give the TUC initiative their full support.

"The situation in the region is dire and the trade union movement will do

whatever it can to assist humanitarian relief operations on the ground," he explained.

In the longer term, Billy insists that "a just and lasting peace in the region can only be achieved through negotiations with all of the elected representatives of the Palestinian people.

"Israel must accept that the Palestinians voted for Hamas and they must be prepared to negotiate with Hamas as equals. There is no other path to peace."

During the invasion, Billy joined tens of thousands of protesters in central London in demanding an end to the attack on Gaza.

Addressing the rally, the CWU leader thanked the many thousands of protesters for turning out on such a bitterly cold winter's day and urged them to join the Palestine Solidarity Campaign as members.

"Keep up the fight for a just peace for the Palestinians," he stressed.

● The union has donated £1,000 to the TUC's 'Give to Gaza' appeal and further details of how individuals can make contributions can be found at www.tuc.org.uk/giveforgaza

A HOME INSURANCE OFFER FOR CWU MEMBERS

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First Direct	£54.10	£137.74
Cornhill Direct	£53.94	£115.63

*Figures are from Consumer Intelligence 01 Sept – 30 Sept 2008 for prices of Buildings and Contents Insurance using a representative sample of the British population. 10% of consumers achieve these savings with CWU Buildings and Contents Insurance.

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GOING UNDERGROUND

They may be small in number, but day in, day out a section of the CWU's membership provides a crucial round-the-clock communications service to the police and emergency services - including a rapid response unit on 24/7 alert to respond to emergencies in the London Underground. **Simon Alford** looks at the vital public service provided by members in Airwave...

On July 7, 2005 – as four massive explosions wreaked carnage and chaos across the heart of central London – a team of Airwave staff, with the support of a third party company, suddenly found themselves in the thick of the emergency response to tragedy on the Tube.

Their contribution – helping the emergency services communicate with each other underground in the aftermath of the terrorist outrage – was not just valuable but arguably extraordinary, given that the technology they used was only in its developmental stage at the time.

Literally thinking on their feet, the team put theory and fledgling equipment into practice – demonstrating in a real-life emergency situation the value of a project that had only been commissioned by the Home Office the previous year.

Lead CWU rep at Airwave, Chris Mason, explains: "The guys went in almost blind because what they did had only been done in theory before."

"The emergency services at the scene weren't all using Airwave technology at the time – so our people literally had to teach some users how to use the equipment on site."

The system worked and very deservedly, in October 2005, Airwave was awarded the contract to provide emergency access to communications in the London Underground should a major incident wipe out all other forms of communications.

In December that year – just five months after the bombings – the Emergency Response Vehicle (ERV) Team was launched. Since then, operating round-the-clock shift patterns, the 20-strong team has been ready and waiting to respond to emergencies anywhere on the London Underground within 30 minutes from their base in Hemel Hempstead.

As yet, the ERVs have never been 'deployed in anger' – a military term which is unsurprising given the high ratio of people with a Forces background in the team – and everyone involved insists they hope they never are.

In order to keep in a constant state of readiness during the grim 'waiting game', however, frequent practice runs are held. Some are scheduled, others occur completely out of the blue.

Once a call comes in on a special designated phone, the teams on duty are contractually bound to have left base within 30 minutes, having first carried out checks to their equipment and vehicles. In practice, however, a constant and thorough programme of response readiness means they are normally able to leave in minutes.

Sometimes it's only once they are out on the road, adrenaline buzzing, that teams get to suspect the callout isn't for real when they aren't quickly joined by a 'blue light' police escort.

ERV Team members have, however, recently completed a gruelling

“YOU NEVER WANT THAT PHONE CALL AS IT WOULD MEAN SOMETHING AWFUL HAS HAPPENED”



Metropolitan Police programme of 'blue light' training themselves as a result of lessons learned on 7/7 when, despite the escorts, they found themselves 'cut up' by other vehicles 'tail-gating' the police.

This training makes them the only civilian workforce allowed to operate 'blues and twos' capability in emergency situations – 'blues' being the lights and 'twos' the sirens.

ERV manager Peter Keen – formerly a CWU member but now a member of Connect – stresses the intention is not necessarily to drive fast but to use specially learned "road craft" to travel to the emergency scene faster than the prevailing traffic would ordinarily allow.

"The training at Hendon we all had last summer was 60 hours of good fun but also pretty stressful – not just because of the serious point to it but also because what you're taught to do is very alien," explains Peter.

DRILLING FOR DISASTER
Arriving at the Underground station closest to the emergency scene – either make-believe or for real – ERV teams link up with the Incident Controller. Once clearance is given to enter the tunnels, they begin to deploy the specially designed equipment that creates a radio signal that all the emergency services can tap into, even when deep underground.

Key to the technology is special cabling originally devised and developed by Airwave whose engineers collectively refer to it as a 'leaky feeder' – for good reason because it 'leaks' radio signals along its length to places where otherwise none would exist.

Signals picked up from emergency services underground are then fed back along the cable to the ERV at the surface

which, thanks to a 12-metre mast, can transmit the resulting communications into Airwave's above-ground secure digital radio system.

Despite the superficial simplicity of the operation, the technology behind both the cabling and the ERVs is extremely complex – and ERV team members are understandably proud of their capabilities.

James Spencer, a former member of the Royal Signals who saw active service in Bosnia and Kosovo in his pre-Airwave days, explains: "Using the equipment for real is not a situation we'd ever want to be in, but at least we'd know that we'd be doing something positive in a bad situation."

Fellow CWU member Phil Creed agrees: "The knowledge that you could be called out at any moment does concentrate the mind. I'd feel proud to help out if a situation arises, but you obviously never want that phone call as it would mean something awful has happened."

All ERV members are acutely aware that in a real emergency they may witness unpleasant scenes – and indeed psychometric testing to check individual's likely response, and therefore suitability, is part of the recruitment process.

"If we were called somewhere with gruesome scenes we'd have to put it to the back of our minds, get on with our job and think about it afterwards," explains James.

Phil concludes: "We have the news channel on at work, and if you see something about an 'incident in London' you can't help but think 'are we going to get a call?'"

"Thankfully we haven't yet – but you never know." **V**

▲ Main image: Phil Creed (left) and James Spencer by one of the ERV Land Rovers



Peter Keen, manager of the Emergency Response Vehicle team



Chris Mason, CWU lead rep for the whole of Airwave

Big picture

The work carried out by CWU members in Airwave literally affects us all...

Airwave's ERV team is just part of a wider story of public service carried out by CWU members at the company. Airwave won its first contract to provide communications for a police force in Lancashire in 2001 and by 2005 its service had been rolled out nationally. 24 hours a day, 365 days a year the system keeps police, fire and ambulance services talking even where there is no commercial mobile coverage – but inevitably it is in emergency situations when its contribution becomes most newsworthy.

Airwave kept London's emergency services able to keep talking above ground – as well as helping to aid a desperate situation below – on 7/7 when most mobile networks were overwhelmed, and has also restored emergency communications following emergencies like storms and floods – including the one at Boscastle in Cornwall.

It also allows emergency services to communicate amongst themselves – the lack of which had been identified as a serious failing that hampered the rescue effort following the IRA's bombing of the Grand Hotel in Brighton in 1982.

Lead CWU rep Chris Mason told the Voice: "People in Airwave are the most committed people I've ever worked with in my life. They understand that if they don't perform then lives are potentially at risk – and, needless to say, they do perform."

Company spokesperson Sue Quigley agreed: "We're very lucky we have naturally committed and very passionate people who frequently go the extra mile without requiring reward or recompense for that."



LEGALISE DRUGS OR NOT?

The debate over the legalisation of drugs has picked up pace over recent years as it has become increasingly clear that the present crime and punishment approach isn't working. Here, **Paul Donovan** looks at both sides, talking to the minister with responsibility for drugs policy and a leading campaign group that argues the case for controlled legalisation...



FOR

Steve Rolles, head of research at Transform Drug Policy Foundation, backs the call for legalisation, arguing for effectively regulating and controlling drug production, supply and use within the law...

Billions in government funds are spent every year attempting to eliminate the supply and use of illegal drugs. Yet there is increasingly clear evidence that these attempts are not only ineffective, but counterproductive. It has created an illegal market that fuels crime and violence from Brixton to Bogota, and whose criminal reach extends from money laundering to political corruption, from civil war to terrorism.

But these problems are not created by the drugs themselves. They are a direct result of the international policy that creates this vast illegal market. Just as it did in 1920s America, prohibition stimulates crime by turning lucrative markets over to gangsters. By placing their supply and use outside the law, it maximizes the harm drugs cause both to users and to society.

Yet the policy that aims to eliminate drug supply and use has failed in spectacular style. Over the last 40 years illegal drug use has risen by at least 300 per cent, with drugs now cheaper and more available than ever. The policy is achieving the exact opposite of its stated aim.

When high demand for drugs collides with laws that prohibit them, low-value commodities become, quite literally, worth more than their weight in gold.

The lucrative opportunities created attract violent criminal entrepreneurs who control a market worth £300 billion a year. Low income dependent drug users resort to crimes – over half of all acquisitive crime by UK government estimates. Prohibition further criminalises millions of otherwise law-abiding adults, making it unparalleled in its contribution to prison overcrowding and the wider crisis in the criminal justice system.

We must respond to the current crisis with a rational exploration of options for effectively regulating and controlling drug production, supply and use within the law, rather than pursuing a failed, counterproductive and endless war. Such controls are not a panacea for all the health harms that drugs cause, but afford many more opportunities to intervene responsibly in drug markets and reduce the problems they cause.

Potentially dangerous substances can be – and already are – controlled by medical prescription, licensed retailing or licensed premises (e.g. pubs). Different drugs will require different regulatory regimes, and some prohibitions will still remain – for example, supplying drugs to minors. We can, however, learn from past successes and failures.

The debate over drugs policy has become polarised over recent years between those who seek legalisation and opponents who argue for the continuation of the present prohibition policies.

A caveat within the pro-legalisation advocates is the vast majority who favour regulated availability of certain drugs through the NHS and a minority who favour a wholesale 'let the market decide' approach.

There have been newspaper campaigns seeking legalisation of drugs and a variety of MPs and organisations weighing in with criticism of the present system of criminalisation.

One longstanding opponent has been Labour MP Paul Flynn who argues in favour of the approach taken in Switzerland and the Netherlands, where the illegal market has been collapsed and replaced by "one that can be regulated, licensed and controlled."

The Government has appeared to listen to the different arguments, ploughing huge resources into treatment programmes for drug addicts. The carrot of treatment has been accompanied, however, by the stick of heavy prison sentences for those who refuse to reform.

The Government did make a gesture towards legalisation when down-grading cannabis from a grade B to grade C drug in 2003. Yet just last month the Home Office moved to regrade cannabis to B – flying in the face of advice from its own Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs.

Apparently contradictory Home Office advice to police officers that, despite the re-grading, they should still exercise discretion when deciding whether or not to make arrest, can, however, be seen as muddying the waters still further.

However apparently confusing, the philosophical underpinning of the Government's position appears to be that if drugs were legalised it would opening up the floodgates.

Drug use, the argument goes, would increase because it would be so much easier to get hold of the substances. Opponents argue that the present approach ignores demand and is, at best, only blocking up some supply lines.

Critics also argue that if the Government was serious about cutting crime it would adopt the controlled legalisation approach, given that more than half of all crime is drug related.

The other political parties vacillate around the issue with the Conservatives generally favouring the hardline 'law and order' approach while the Liberal Democrat leadership appear to be in constant retreat from the more pro-legalisation positions supported by rank-and-file members at the party conference.

The situation at present could at best be described as one of stalemate with pro and anti-legalisation camps seemingly as entrenched as ever. If there is to be change it could be the escalating cost factor of imprisonment and treatment programmes that may tip the balance. **V**

AGAINST

Alan Campbell, Home Office drugs minister, argues against legalisation, claiming the present approach to treatment and punishment is working in countering the threat posed by drugs...



Drugs are controlled in the UK for good reasons – they are bad for your health and cause immense harm to individuals, families and communities. It is the Government's job to protect the public and the drugs laws we have are a necessary and legitimate means of keeping people safe from the damage caused by their misuse.

Latest statistics show overall drug use continues to fall and is at its lowest level for more than ten years. Our efforts in tackling drugs are clearly delivering results. This is reflected in the record number of drug seizures – but our focus is not only on enforcement, but also early intervention, education and treatment.

The Government's new drug strategy, published in February this year, aims to prevent drug use among young people and ensure that those who have developed problems with drugs have prompt access to drug treatment. Already, the number of people accessing drug treatment has increased by more than 130 per cent over the past ten years.

We have always been clear that our drug strategy would operate within the existing legal framework and the international conventions which underpin it. We have been unequivocal in our

stance of having no intention of either decriminalising or legalising currently controlled drugs for recreational purposes.

With most drugs, there is a direct relationship between the amount of use and the level of harm. There is overwhelming evidence that the widespread use of drugs results in enormous social harms and economic costs: drug-related deaths, the spread of HIV and Hepatitis B and C through injecting drug use and the mental health disorders associated with the use of drugs to name but a few.

It is very difficult to make direct comparisons with the drug use and drug policies of different countries or cultures. The Government must decide what policy will work for Britain in its present economic, social and cultural climate.

An alternative system of regulated supply would not safeguard very real public health interests, nor necessarily significantly undermine international organised crime. The benefits of such a system – taxation, quality control and a reduction on the pressures on the criminal justice system – are far outweighed by the costs and for this reason, it is one that this Government will not pursue either domestically or internationally."