

# Australian union to impose Telstra's cuts

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After 15 months of negotiations, the Communications Electrical and Plumbers Union (CEPU) has agreed to back a new work agreement that will cut the working conditions of over 60,000 workers employed by Telstra, Australia's semi-privatised national communications carrier.

The negotiations were bought to a close two weeks ago when Telstra management announced that its latest offer was final and threatened to sideline the union bureaucrats by seeking individual contracts with workers if the Enterprise Bargaining Agreement was not endorsed.

Among other things the agreement includes:

- \* The introduction of three work streams to replace eight job classifications. It will abolish demarcation, particularly between line staff and technicians, creating the conditions for increased workloads and job losses.

- \* The extension of shift arrangements to all sections, including linesmen who are currently exempt from shift work. Saturday morning work performed by linesmen, once classified as overtime, can now be designated as part of their standard shifts.

- \* The removal of all limitations on the use of part-time employees, opening the door for destruction of full-time jobs.

- \* The standardisation of ordinary hours for full-time workers at 36 and three-quarter hours per week, significantly increasing the hours worked by some sections. The agreement will also extend the span of hours worked from the present 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., to 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.

The union has dropped its claim for a 15 percent pay rise over two years and has accepted the company's offer of 8 percent. However, due to the one-year delay since negotiations began, the actual pay increase averages out to a meagre 2.7 percent a year.

Many workers will suffer real pay losses when they are re-graded. For example, Level 6 Technical

Specialists will lose approximately \$3,000 a year when they are reclassified in lower grades. Customer Area Service managers will be put on a flat salary, cutting out overtime payments and other allowances.

In addition, workers will now be graded on their formal qualifications and will be paid only for the skill levels required for actual work performed.

Despite claims that the union had no choice but to endorse the new work arrangements, CEPU National President Col Cooper praised the agreement, saying the union 'believed the deal to be a reasonable outcome for Telstra's workforce'.

The simple truth is that CEPU's actions over the past 15 months had nothing to do with defending the interests of Telstra workers. Even as the unions were locked in closed-door discussions with Telstra management, the downsizing of thousands of jobs continued unopposed.

The union leaders' aim was to use the threat of industrial action to pressure Telstra to maintain the union-management consultation mechanisms that have been scrapped in the new agreement. Their only concern is that the company continue to work through the union to impose the cuts.

To this end, after months of silence, CEPU suddenly called national membership meetings in August and proposed a campaign of stoppages and work bans. The union then immediately limited the action to job by job stoppages to ensure that it did not seriously disrupt Telstra's operations.

Fearful of encountering considerable opposition if they call mass membership meetings on the new agreement, the union leadership is presently conducting area by area meetings to soften up workers to vote for the agreement in a postal ballot before the end of the year.

At many work locations the union is conducting these job meetings accompanied by management

representatives. Only last year CEPU used exactly the same method to push through the 'Tullamarine Agreement' that opened the way for management to slash 12,000 jobs in the Consumer and Commercial Division.

The adoption of such measures itself speaks volumes about the real content of the latest agreement and whose interests it serves.

While making record profits Telstra is now facing increasing competition nationally and has been sharply affected by the failure of its global ventures, including mounting losses from investments in Indonesia, India, China and Indo-China. The increasingly ruthless struggle for market share is driving the deepening assault on workers' conditions that will only accelerate over the next months.

However, the Telstra unions--both CEPU and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU)--accept the dictates of the private profit system. They have continually harnessed Telstra workers behind the company's struggle to survive, effectively pitting Telstra workers against their fellow workers in Optus and other private companies, as well as telecommunications workers overseas.

Despite the unions' long record of betrayals on jobs and conditions, Telstra workers have not yet voiced any fundamental opposition or advanced an independent alternative. The rejection of the latest union-management agreement needs to become the starting point for a serious review of how communications workers have arrived at the present impasse.

The All Communication Workers Alliance (ACWA) has been founded by the Socialist Equality Party to facilitate the widest discussion and to advance an internationalist and socialist perspective that challenges the profit system and fights to unify communications workers in a common global struggle against the companies. We invite all communications workers to contact and join the ACWA.

See Also:

Australian union profits from job destruction  
[11 November 1998]



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