

Australian communications union faces membership decline

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20 February 1999

The Communications Electrical and Plumbing Union, one of Australia's largest unions, is desperately attempting to stem the 35 percent fall in its membership that has occurred over the past eight years. The decline has escalated in recent years as the union has deepened its collaboration with Telstra--the semi-privatised national communications carrier--to eliminate 23,000 jobs and outsource increasing amounts of work to contractors.

While the drop in membership is largely the result of the downsizing, many of the displaced workers who were re-employed by the contracting companies have refused to rejoin the union.

This month the union sent out membership renewal cards accompanied by a glossy brochure offering special discounts on a range of consumer items. The union leaders hope that this will lure workers back to the union and placate the growing hostility generated by years of union sellouts.

Similar schemes featured in the recruitment campaign launched two years ago by the union movement's peak body, the Australian Council of Trade Unions. The ACTU venture turned out to be a dismal failure as union membership continued to plummet.

A new Telstra work agreement signed by the union at the beginning of the year, and the bureaucratic methods used to push it through, have further fuelled the disenchantment of CEPU members. The agreement will assign even more jobs to the scrapheap and further undermine working conditions. It includes:

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

- * 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 time worked by some sections. The agreement will also extend the span of hours worked from the present 7am to 6pm to 7am to 7pm.

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

At the same time, many workers will suffer real pay losses when they are re-graded under the new work streams. Workers will now be graded on their formal qualifications and will be paid only for the skill levels required for actual work performed.

Throughout the 18 months of negotiations on the agreement, CEPU officials worked to keep the lid on growing opposition by the rank and file. They called combined membership meetings in August last year to let off steam, declaring there would be no trade-offs of working conditions and that strike action was being planned.

Following a brief spate of uncoordinated and ineffective industrial action, the union accepted Telstra's demands. Workers were called to joint union-management meetings where union officials claimed that the agreement was the best outcome possible given the "prevailing political and economic circumstances".

After further state union meetings, where no debate or vote on the agreement was permitted, workers voted in depot-by-depot secret ballots, organised and supervised by the management.

When some workers demanded the right to scrutinise the vote, they were told that the count would take place in a central location, overseen by an "independent body" appointed by the company. This went unchallenged by the union.

A separate vote organised by CEPU to present a semblance of independence collapsed when thousands of members failed to receive a ballot. The union accepted the result of the management's ballot as the last word.

Despite the united efforts of the company and the union, over 30 percent of Telstra workers voted against the deal. There is evidence of widespread resentment among workers who voted in favour only because they could not see an alternative. In the final analysis, no amount of gimmicks or bribes will convince communication workers to give their loyalty to an organisation that in no way represents their interests and in which they have no real say.



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