Online meeting reveals union complicity in attacks on Australia Post workers

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An online "briefing" called by unions covering Australia Post (AP) last Thursday night underlined their indifference to the dangers facing workers at the publicly-owned mail service amid the pandemic. It signalled the willingness of the unions to enforce the sweeping cuts to jobs, wages and conditions being demanded by management on the pretext of the coronavirus.

The national event, which was attended by several thousand workers, was the first held by the Communication Electrical and Plumbers Union (CEPU) and the Communications Workers Union (CWU) since the COVID-19 crisis began.

Opening the meeting, Shane Murphy, CWU national president and CEPU vice-president, declared it would discuss "very important issues." There was no report, however, on the number of workers infected with the virus, where they were employed and whether they had made a full recovery.

Only after at least one member asked in the chat field how many workers had tested positive, CWU national secretary Greg Rayner said there had been no new infections since April. He revealed, however, that 24 AP workers remained in isolation.

Rayner did not indicate whether the workers had been tested and were awaiting results or how they were potentially exposed to the virus. He claimed that those previously infected had fully recovered. In an April 4 email to members, Murphy had reported that 11 postal workers in Sydney alone had contracted COVID-19, at least four of them while they were on the job. No further information has been provided to workers since then.

AP was designated an essential service by the federal Liberal-National government, meaning that employees were forced to continue working throughout the lockdown measures imposed to combat the spread of the virus.

As infections were recorded, the unions ensured there was no disruption to operations, despite the absence of mass testing among workers and the fact that they were initially not provided with hand sanitiser and personal protective equipment.

The lack of information on the pandemic set the tone for the meeting. The union officials prevented workers from speaking and from putting motions. Comments made in the chat field could not be seen by all participants. As a result, statements and inquiries from members were vetted. Most of the 260 questions raised were not answered.

A motion by some members calling for the meeting to allow all workers the right to speak was not reported to participants or voted upon. Questions about the pandemic, including the absence of on-site testing, were ignored.

Most of the meeting focused on a vast pro-business restructure announced by AP management last month and associated discussions about a new workplace enterprise agreement.

The management overhaul includes abolishing priority mail deliveries, reducing letter delivery in metropolitan areas from daily to once every two days and extending delivery times for intrastate letters to five days.

The changes are aimed at slashing costs and transforming the company into a profitable parcel-delivery service to hasten long-standing plans for privatisation. Australia Post CEO Christine Holgate described them as the largest overhaul of work practices in over two decades, raising the spectre of mass sackings and the further casualisation of the workforce.

Management and the unions already have enforced attacks on conditions over the past three months, changing rostered start times on the pretext of allowing social distancing in mail sorting facilities. This means later start times of 6:30am rather than 6am for some workers, and 9am for others.

This has increased workloads, giving employees less time to finish their beats despite a higher volume of parcel

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deliveries, and reduced overtime and penalty rate wage payments, which must be paid before 6:30am.

Postal workers are still having to deliver junk advertising mail, which is highly time-consuming, but lucrative for AP.

The union officials who spoke at the meeting primarily complained that they had not been consulted prior to the announcement of the restructure.

These claims are a transparent sham. AP's plans for a sweeping overhaul have been on the public record for years. Moves to slash letter delivery and transform AP into a parcel-delivery service were revealed in a 2018 review, details of which were published by the *Sydney Morning Herald* earlier this year.

The unions are seeking to divert anger behind appeals to the Labor Party opposition to block legislative changes required for the restructure, even though Labor has played a central role in the corporatisation of AP and mass sackings at the company. The unions have initiated a toothless online petition, appealing to the government and management.

At the same time, the union is working with Communications Minister Paul Fletcher. Murphy revealed that officials have held backroom meetings with him, supposedly to ask which changes would be permanent and whether they are in preparation for privatisation. Murphy complained that despite verbal assurances that the changes were temporary, the unions had not been given any written guarantees.

In reality, the unions are fully prepared to enforce the dictates of the company and the government, as they have for decades. The primary concern of the union bureaucrats is that they are adequately "consulted," i.e., that their role as an industrial police for management, from which their privileges derive, is maintained.

This was highlighted in an answer to a question during the meeting. A worker wrote: "Restructuring in the past led to the destruction of hundreds, if not thousands of jobs. Any new round of restructuring will lead to further cuts in jobs/conditions—this is what the letter from AP to members prior to this meeting is threatening. What does the union propose to do about this?"

Phil Kessey, a CEPU official, replied in a "private answer," ensuring no one else in the chat could see. He said the union would: "Campaign and fight reforms that are not agreed. We are not averse to sensible changes to save jobs but we will fight blind cost cutting!"

Kessey's response, and previous statements from Rayner and Murphy, demonstrate that the unions will present management attacks as measures necessary to combat the pandemic, and will seek to bully workers into accepting them.

This is a continuation of the unions' decades-long collaboration with management in the gutting of workers' conditions. This included the enforcement of 900 sackings announced in 2014, and another 1,900 job cuts the following year, along with other measures, such as the increased use of contractors.

The conduct of the briefing and the suppression of the democratic right of workers to speak is a warning of what is being prepared. The unions are seeking to prevent any discussion among workers, because their aim is to prevent a genuine fight against the attacks of management, the government and the entire political establishment.

The meeting underscored the need for AP workers to form independent organisations of struggle, including rank and file committees, to defend their interests. These would be tasked with fighting to ensure that all workers are provided with protective equipment and that mass testing is immediately rolled out among AP employees.

Rank and file committees could organise broad industrial and political action, mobilising the strength of AP's workforce against the restructure. They could break the isolation imposed by the unions, by uniting with other workers who are being propelled into struggle, including health employees, teachers and construction workers.

Above all, postal workers need a new political perspective that rejects the subordination of their jobs and safety to profit interests. A socialist program is required, aimed at establishing a workers' state that would place necessary services, including AP, along with the banks and major corporations, under public ownership and democratic workers' control. This is the only means of ensuring a full-time job with decent conditions for all employees and a safe working environment.

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