

Australia Post restructure threatens over 2,000 jobs

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A sweeping restructure by Australia Post, the country's government-operated postal service, threatens up to 2,500 jobs, along with wage reductions and further attacks on working conditions.

Postal workers were informed at briefings called by management last week that one in four postal delivery positions would no longer be required. Australia Post has roughly 10,000 delivery employees, out of a total workforce of around 30,000.

While executives have told the press that workers would be redeployed and sackings were not on the agenda, management informed employees that redundancies would be offered, confirming that positions will be abolished.

The cuts are part of a broader offensive by governments, the corporations and the trade unions, in Australia and internationally. They are seeking to exploit the COVID-19 pandemic to implement long-standing plans for a vast pro-business restructuring of workplace conditions and industrial relations. The privatisation of nominally government-owned utilities, such as Australia Post, is a key component of this agenda.

The speed with which management at Australia Post is proceeding with these plans is a warning to the entire working class.

In April, it announced major changes to delivery schedules and workers' conditions, claiming that these would be only for the duration of the immediate health crisis.

Last week, however, management revealed the elimination of thousands of existing positions, showing its intent to make the arrangements permanent. Government-owned entities and corporate employers across the country are undoubtedly preparing similar measures.

Management described the April announcement as Australia Post's most significant restructure in over two decades. The centrepiece was a reduction in the frequency of letter delivery in metropolitan areas from every business day, to every second business day. The required time frame for the delivery of intra-state letters was extended to five days and priority mail letter delivery was abolished.

The overhaul was introduced by fiat, with the Liberal-National Coalition government changing regulations that govern Australia Post on May 14. Other sweeping policy decisions were introduced in a similar manner on the pretext of the coronavirus health and economic crisis, without any opposition from Labor, the Greens or any other parliamentary party.

The Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU), which covers the sector, complained only that it had not been sufficiently "consulted" before the overhaul was announced.

The union has collaborated with Australia Post management, forcing postal workers to remain on the job throughout the pandemic, despite its members complaining about inadequate safety equipment. By April 4, eleven posties had tested positive for COVID-19 in Sydney alone, with at least four of them having been ill on the job.

CEPU officials have since held closed-door meetings with government ministers about the restructure. They have sought to divert concern among workers behind feckless petitions, appealing to management and the government not to make the changes permanent. At the same time, they have deprived workers of information and suppressed democratic discussion at online meetings supposedly called to oppose the overhaul.

By preventing any industrial and political struggle by postal workers the union has paved the way for

management's attacks.

Postal delivery workers currently cover one assigned beat, or delivery round. Under the changes, two posties will be tasked with delivering letters to four beats, meaning a substantial increase in their workloads. A third employee will deliver parcels to all four beats. In other words, previously four beats meant four employees, but now that number will be reduced to three. The union also has revealed that pay cuts of up to 30 percent may be imposed.

The changes are aimed at transforming Australia Post into a lucrative parcel delivery service, in preparation for privatisation. Over the past decade, the volume of letters has continuously decreased. Amid the rise of online shopping, parcel deliveries have soared. In the last financial year, the parcel and services sector accounted for \$4.8 billion of Australia Post's \$6.99 billion revenue.

Business commentators, along with corporate analysts hired by Australia Post, have called for major overhauls to its business model including a reduction in the frequency of letter delivery and a greater deployment of resources into the parcel sector.

As has been the case in other sectors, including the airline and power generation industries, the elimination of "excess" jobs and a more direct orientation to the demands of business is the essential precondition for a government-owned utility to be sold-off and acquired by private investors.

Labor and the Greens feigned shock and outrage at Australia Post's announcement last week. They promised to move a disallowance motion in the Senate, which resumes sittings this week, to overturn the government's regulatory changes.

But Labor and the Greens said virtually nothing when the regulations were changed almost a month ago. The restructure, moreover, was announced nearly two months ago and is already underway.

Labor's industrial relations spokesman Tony Burke has now branded the overhaul as "a tricky attempt to bypass scrutiny." He condemned a lack of "consultation." This means that Labor will support sweeping cuts provided they are made in consultation with the unions, which have helped impose thousands of job cuts in the past decade.

The last Greens-backed Labor government oversaw the destruction of 2,396 permanent jobs at Australia

Post, increasing the proportion of casual and contract workers. The current Liberal-National government then presided over 900 job cuts announced in 2014, and another 1,900 in 2015.

The record demonstrates that workers cannot place their faith in the unions or any big business government, Labor or Coalition. It underscores the bankruptcy of the CEPU's call for workers to lobby parliament to disallow the regulation and prevent changes to Australia Post legislation.

The union's attempts to sow illusions in Labor go hand in hand with its acceptance of the job cuts. At CEPU members' meetings last week union officials declared that contractors must be removed before postal workers lose their jobs. The union opposes any unified struggle in defence of jobs and working conditions.

Instead, CEPU is beginning negotiations with management for a new enterprise agreement. The waves of union-enforced job cuts over the past two decades make clear that any agreement will be a sell-out that facilitates Australia Post's main demands.

To defeat this onslaught, new organisations of struggle, completely independent of the unions, are required. Postal workers should establish rank and file committees to prosecute a genuine fight against the restructure. These would be tasked with breaking the isolation imposed by the union, and turning out to other sections of the working class facing similar attacks.

Above all, the corporate-union offensive underscores the need for an alternative political perspective which rejects the subordination of social needs, such as decent postal services and well-paid permanent jobs, to private profit. This means the fight for a workers' government that would implement socialist policies, including placing Australia Post under democratic workers' control and nationalising the banks and major corporations.

We invite all postal workers who want to discuss their experiences and take part in such a struggle to contact the Socialist Equality Party at sep@sep.org.au



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