

Unions trying to suppress workers' opposition to pro-business restructure at Australia Post

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Officials from the Communication Workers Union (CWU) and the Communications Electrical Plumbing Union (CEPU) are attempting to stifle mounting opposition to a pro-business restructure at Australia Post (AP), which threatens thousands of jobs and is already sharply increasing workloads.

In recent weeks, Shane Murphy, the national president of the CEPU's communications division, has held meetings with workers at several facilities of the government-operated postal service, including in the Sydney suburb of Kingsgrove and the regional New South Wales town of Tweed Heads.

Workers who attended one of the Sydney meetings told the *World Socialist Web Site* that Murphy feigned concern over "safety issues" and declared that the purpose of his visit was to solicit "feedback" on the "Alternative Delivery Model" (ADM)—the centrepiece of the AP restructure.

Murphy's posturing is bogus. The unions have ensured that postal workers have remained on the job throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, including in its initial stages, when there were widespread complaints over inadequate protective equipment, such as hand sanitiser. The CWU and CEPU suppressed information. AP CEO Christine Holgate only revealed, months after the fact, that at least 50 AP workers had been infected.

The unions have served as the chief enablers of the ADM. While they falsely claimed they had been blind-sided, the unions facilitated regulatory changes imposed by the federal Liberal-National government and AP management in April.

These measures included the suspension of requirements for every-day letter delivery, and a reduction in the number of AP staff covering beats, in favour of an expansion of the number of van drivers delivering parcels.

At the time, the unions echoed the claims that the changes were simply a response to the pandemic.

As the WSWs warned, AP management, the government and the unions are exploiting the coronavirus crisis to push ahead with longstanding plans for a restructure, aimed at focusing operations on the lucrative parcel sector, in preparation for privatisation.

This was confirmed in July, when the unions signed a "memorandum of understanding" with management, mandating the roll out of the ADM. In exchange for a worthless pledge of no forced redundancies before July 2021, the unions are overseeing the restructure. They have called on workers to join Local Working Groups, run by management and tasked with implementing the restructuring, and have agreed to a year-long ban on industrial action.

At the meeting, Murphy said nothing about this record. He and the unions have presented the increased workloads and deterioration of conditions as a result of "management bungling." This is aimed at covering-up the underlying pro-business agenda to which the unions are fully committed.

While issuing weasel words of concern, Murphy said the ADM would likely be made permanent, or at least entrenched for the foreseeable future. He pointed to the government's support for the scheme, repeating union calls for workers to focus on "pressuring" the parties of big business, including Labor and the Greens, which have overseen the destruction of tens of thousands of postal jobs over the past two decades.

The unions are continuing to collaborate with management behind closed doors. Murphy told the workers he would convey their concerns when he met with the company's state manager the following day.

In reality, the unions are pitching themselves to

management, the government and big business as being the best force to enforce the restructure and identify further “efficiencies” and improvements to “productivity.”

In September, the CEPU and CWU sent AP workers a link to an online Alternate Delivery Model Efficiency Survey. “Fight their data with yours,” the unions declared in a text message.

The survey is actually a time and motion study, aimed at speeding up deliveries and identifying hold ups. The unions have said its purpose is to “improve service to the public,” by which they mean major corporations, not ordinary people.

The unions are asking the workers to fill out the survey after every shift, answering questions such as: “Were any packets, parcels or other premium products such as Express post or StarTrack articles left behind, or brought back and remained undelivered on your run, today?” and “Did you adhere to all footpath/nature strip speed limits?”

In addition to being asked to upload photos of undelivered parcels and mail, workers have been instructed to provide their full name, facility and beat number. The unions claim the data will be released only in aggregate, but if so, why do they need so much identifying information?

Clearly, the union survey would be of great value to management, and its bid to intensify the restructure. The results will feature in a union submission to a current federal government review of the ADM.

Communications Minister Paul Fletcher has written to business chiefs asking for their “feedback” on the new delivery model. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, a representative of Fletcher’s office said the review, to be completed by the end of the year, would determine whether the ADM regulatory changes “should continue to June 30 next year.”

The article highlighted “frustration” at major corporations over delays to parcel deliveries. In part, the global pandemic has sharply reduced passenger flights, which also carry freight. The logic of the business complaints, however, is that the restructure must be stepped-up, with an ever-greater focus on parcel delivery.

As AP management made clear in its initial ADM proposal, it would result in the elimination of up to one in four jobs.

AP has announced it is “hiring” 4,000 additional workers to “cope with the Christmas rush.” But according to management, 2,900 will be casuals, with no rights and no permanent job. Only 300 will be full-time employees

and the rest will be on short-term contracts. This is the chief purpose of the restructure: to transform the workforce into a casual and contract labour pool that can be hired and fired at will.

The other purpose is to make AP as profitable as possible, to prepare for it to be sold off. AP’s revenue was up 7 percent, or \$500 million, for the 2019-2020 financial year, to almost \$7.5 billion.

AP already functions like a major private company. Earlier this month, it was reported that CEO Holgate had spent around \$300,000 on company credit cards and chauffeur-driven cars in 12 months. AP had also spent some \$3,000 a day on a “reputation management consultant.”

Such practices are endemic throughout both the public and private sectors. The revelations were only made public to pressure the management to accelerate the restructure, while permitting Labor, the Greens and the unions to make a show of mock outrage.

In reality, the unions are enforcing the restructure, backed by the entire political establishment. Murphy called the staff meetings after several AP workers spoke out in interviews with the WSWS and called for the formation of independent rank-and-file committees.

This call has evidently unnerved the unions. It must be taken up by workers more broadly.

As one of the workers explained: “Workers in other countries confront the same and worse, like we see in the US and the UK. Our situation is the same everywhere. All the unions do is tell us we can’t organise outside, and tie our hands so we can’t fight back, while they are busy hatching rotten deals and useless campaigns that in the end only help the employers get everything they want.

“Workers are seeking a new way to fight and would support the building of rank-and-file committees to unite their struggles and organise themselves. I think such organisations will need to educate workers about the lessons we have been through, especially the role of the unions, so we don’t make the same mistakes.” *We appeal to AP workers who want to fight the restructure and the dangerous conditions to contact the Socialist Equality Party at: sep@sep.org.au.*



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact