

Union opposes worker's call for a fight against pro-business Australia Post restructure

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15 November 2020

A meeting at a Sydney depot of Australia Post (AP) last Friday proved yet again that the unions are an industrial police force of management. Their role is to block any struggle by workers against a pro-business restructure of the national postal service that has already resulted in intolerable conditions and threatens thousands of jobs.

The gathering, at AP's Alexandria facility, was called by the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU), which along with the Communication Workers Union (CWU), covers AP employees.

Workers at Alexandria told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the union did not give them any advanced warning that a meeting was taking place. No email was sent, nor was any notice put up in the facility.

Instead, the details of the meeting were spread by word of mouth, largely by union delegates. The result was that some workers only found out about the gathering after it had already started. The clear aim, as with all of the union's actions, was to prevent any democratic discussion by workers about the issues they face and the way forward in the fight against the restructure.

Peter Chaloner, the assistant secretary of the CEPU's New South Wales Postal and Telecommunications branch, was the speaker. He was flanked by three other CEPU officials.

Workers have said that Chaloner provided them with virtually no new information, or even with any indication of why the meeting had been called. He reportedly stated that the centrepiece of the restructure, an Alternative Delivery Model (ADM), would remain in place until a federal government review was completed in June.

Chaloner spoke briefly about the resignation of former AP CEO Christine Holgate, following an expenses scandal that erupted last month. He warned that her interim replacement Rodney Boys was not well known to the union, meaning that "negotiations" would need to begin afresh.

The statement demonstrated the union's determination to work closely with management. It was also a signal that the

CEPU is preparing to enforce even sharper attacks on conditions, which it will say are the result of Boys and a lack of adequate "consultation" with the union.

The real issues facing AP staff only emerged in the question period. A worker denounced the union for imposing the ADM, called for a democratic mass meeting of all AP employees around the country and a fightback against the assault on jobs and conditions.

The worker began by outlining the impact of the ADM. Introduced on the pretext of the coronavirus pandemic, it has involved an end to every day letter delivery, and a greater focus on the lucrative parcel sector.

The worker said that the ADM had resulted in a doubling of workloads for him and his colleagues.

Some workers, who had distributed mail by foot for years, were being forced to deliver parcels by van. Their conditions are similar to those facing contractors and workers in the precarious "gig economy." Others, who still have beats, are compelled to cover a far larger area than before. A whole new class of workers has been created, who are termed "floaters." They have no set role, and can be pushed from one job to the next by management.

The worker warned that the ADM was "privatisation by another name." He said its real purpose was to transform AP into a profitable concern, so that it could be sold off to a major corporation.

Turning to the role of the unions, the worker condemned the CEPU and the CWU for enforcing the ADM. At previous online meetings, he noted, the unions had touted supposed "victories," including the fact that for now, no mandatory redundancies had been implemented.

The worker said at these earlier meetings, he had asked what the unions had given away in exchange for these so-called "wins." He declared that the answer was now clear. The unions had signed a "memorandum of understanding" with management which was hatched behind the backs of workers and then publicly announced in July. It pledges that

the CEPU and the CWU will ensure that the ADM proceeds, and bans all industrial action.

“On the eve of the biggest battle we face in the last 40 years you not only emptied our guns of bullets, you pushed us into the trenches with our hands tied behind our backs, and then said go fight!” the worker declared.

“What gives you the right and the union the right to sign away my right to withdraw my labour? If we want to strike, if we want to withdraw our labour, that’s our business. You and the union have no right to sign this away.”

The worker refuted the lies being used to justify the ADM, including that it will result in better services for ordinary people. “Who is winning from this?” he asked. “It’s not customers, who are not receiving their mail or parcels on time. It’s not posties who are working extra hours and doing double mail. So if we aren’t winning and the customers aren’t, then it’s the union and management who are winning, not the workers.”

Many of the sixty or so AP staff present cheered these comments. The worker then moved a motion.

It stated: “This meeting demands that the CEPU and CWU calls a mass meeting at which all Australia Post workers across the country can discuss the way forward in the fight against the ADM and for our rights. Workers must have a say! There must be an industrial and political fightback by all postal workers, but it cannot be limited to one or two depots. Action at any site must be the beginning, not the end, and needs to be developed into a mass industrial and political fight by all workers against this restructure.”

The question was asked: do any workers second the motion? Almost two dozen hands immediately went up.

At this point, Chaloner stepped in to shut down any talk of a struggle against the ADM. He used the standard argument of every union bureaucrat. If it was possible, Chaloner said, he would be the first to support a strike. He would be on the picket line, rain or shine. But nothing can be done, because industrial action is illegal, and workers would face massive fines.

What Chaloner did not mention is that the unions themselves played the central role in outlawing virtually all industrial action. First of all, they supported Fair Work Australia legislation introduced by the last federal Labor government, which bans most strikes. Secondly, they signed a “no-strike” agreement with AP management only months ago!

Chaloner said that if members could not cope with their workloads, they could tell management they were only going to do rostered hours. The worker who put the motion responded by explaining that there was immense pressure on staff to get parcels out. And in any case, what was the point of the union if workers were left to negotiate with

management as individuals?

Chaloner changed tack, declaring that many workers were pleased to have overtime because it helped them pay their mortgages and other expenses. This reportedly provoked considerable anger among workers, who correctly felt that Chaloner was promoting the ADM as a positive development.

He responded by returning to the catch-all justification of the unions for their sordid betrayals and deals with management. If the CEPU hadn’t done what it did, 25 percent of workers would have been sacked. In other words, workers should be pleased that they still have a job, and should keep quiet about conditions.

But as the worker replied, many of his colleagues were being forced to resign because they could not cope with the demands of the ADM. Management’s aim to slash 25 percent of the workforce was being achieved through attrition, and the threat of forced redundancies down the line remained.

With Chaloner continuing to insist that there could be no struggle, many workers simply left the meeting. They know that the unions are not going to take up any fight for their interests.

The worker who moved the motion spoke to the WSWs over the weekend about his motivations. He said that his own position had become intolerable. What had once been a decent job was now a nightmare. He had been moved off the beat he had worked for the previous five years, without any consultation. He was now starting work at 5:30 a.m., and finishing some days at 8 p.m., without having completed all of his deliveries.

He declared: “We have to form a rank-and-file committee. Enough is enough. The fruit is growing rotten on the vine. We need to begin to develop our own campaigns. I can criticise the union, but it is time we take matters into our own hands. Things have moved on. If there isn’t a new leadership for postal workers, they will become more demoralised, and the management attacks will only continue.”

The Socialist Equality Party appeals to all workers who want a democratic discussion about the way forward in the fight against the ADM, privatisation and the assault on conditions to contact us at: sep@sep.org.au



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact