

Union official denounces WSWS, seeks to intimidate workers at Australia Post meeting

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27 November 2020

A meeting last Friday at Australia Post's Alexandria depot in Sydney showcased the role of the unions in browbeating any workers who speak out against a pro-business restructure of the national postal service.

Peter Chaloner, a senior official from the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU), called the meeting. It was held exactly a week after he was challenged by an Alexandria worker over the union's enforcement of an Alternative Delivery Model (ADM), which has resulted in a doubling of workloads, and clears the way for mass job cuts and privatisation.

Chaloner, who is assistant secretary of the CEPU's Postal and Telecommunications branch in New South Wales, was clearly on a damage control operation. At the previous November 13 meeting, the worker who spoke out called for a democratic mass meeting of all Australia Post (AP) workers and the organisation of an industrial and political fight against the restructure. These proposals were warmly received by many of the sixty workers present, but were blocked by Chaloner.

Last Friday, Chaloner's basic message was the same as on November 13: no action could be taken to oppose the ADM or the conditions being imposed on workers, because it would be illegal. But this time, he added a supplementary point. Workers who challenged the union and exposed the CEPU's collaboration with management were spreading "misinformation."

As has repeatedly been the case, workers were not told in advance about last Friday's meeting. Some of them only found out it was taking place a couple of minutes before it began. The clear purpose is to prevent workers discussing beforehand what they want to raise in the meeting, or preparing to speak. Only around 50 of the facility's 350 workers attended, in a reflection of growing hostility to the union.

Chaloner again provided no clear indication of the reason for his presence. Workers have told the WSWS that he gave a bland report about production and logistics inside the facility. He said nothing about the ADM or the fact that it

has pushed workers to the breaking point, with most unable to complete their allotted mail and parcel assignments and many either quitting or thinking about leaving the job.

When Chaloner finished, a worker asked why he had given a production report that could have been delivered by management. And why wasn't the union organising collective action for staff to work rostered hours, instead of being forced to do hours of overtime every day?

The worker said it had been left up to him and his colleagues to decide how much overtime they would do. Workers were negotiating as individuals with management virtually every day, and were under immense pressure to agree to overtime.

Chaloner responded with an extraordinary outburst. The CEPU official told the worker: "You and your Trotskyite friends can go back inside instead of spreading disinformation and accusing us of being the industrial policemen of Australia Post."

A number of workers present were bewildered by Chaloner's hysterical response to legitimate questions about the conditions they face, while others were angry at the outburst.

The CEPU officials jibe about "Trotskyite friends" was clearly a reference to the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS).

Since April, the WSWS has warned that this year's overhaul at Australia Post, including the introduction of the ADM, is an attack on workers' jobs and conditions and a major step towards privatisation. WSWS articles have explained that the pandemic is only the pretext for the restructure. It is based on long-standing plans, drawn up by financial consultancy firms, for a reduction in letter-delivery services and an ever-greater turn to the lucrative parcel sector. The aim is to make AP as profitable as possible, so that it can be sold off.

Everything that has happened since has vindicated these warnings. Workers who have been servicing a letter-beat for years have been told that they have to deliver parcels by van, or they are out of a job. A whole new class of workers,

known as floaters, has been created, without any set job description. They can be forced to carry out whatever task management chooses. And such is the impossibly large number of parcels to be delivered, that those who still have beats are unable to complete them, even after working 12-hour shifts.

From the outset, the WSWs and the SEP have stated that the unions will betray. This has also come to pass. Chaloner's colleagues held closed-door discussions with Liberal-National government ministers before the restructure was introduced, and have since agreed to roll-out the ADM. In June, without any discussion in the membership, the CEPU signed a "memorandum of understanding" with management, allowing the ADM to proceed and banning industrial action for a year.

The union bureaucrats are particularly angry that the WSWs has provided workers with a voice, outside of their control. While Chaloner and the CEPU leadership use union meetings to prevent workers from discussing their grievances and conditions, the WSWs has provided a platform for workers to speak.

In a series of interviews on the WSWs, workers have spoken about the conditions they face, the fact that management and the unions exposed them to the risk of coronavirus infection at the beginning of the pandemic, and the need for a unified political struggle against the ADM.

If he thinks that any of this is "misinformation," then Chaloner should make his case, rather than resorting to snide insults and thinly-veiled intimidation.

As for Chaloner's complaint about the WSWs describing the CEPU as an industrial and political police force of management, his own conduct at the meeting proved the point. He was there to insist that workers cannot oppose the ADM or take any action and to shout down voices of opposition. A company manager would not have behaved differently.

Chaloner, moreover, made plain that the union accepts the entire framework of pro-business industrial laws and regulations that have been used for decades to block any strikes or collective action. In this way, the union does effectively "police" the legislation. It tries to frighten workers considering industrial action by waving the laws at them.

This is literally what Chaloner did when the dissenting worker called for a struggle for rostered hours. Chaloner, prepared for any calls for action, pulled out a copy of 1997 industrial legislation passed by the Liberal-National government of John Howard, banning strikes, and proceeded to quote from it.

Chaloner, however, left out a lot of history, because the CEPU, like most unions, is aligned with the big business

Labor Party. He did not mention that the assault on collective action was initiated by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments of the 1980s and 1990s, and the unions themselves.

Labor and the unions smashed up shop stewards committees and other workers' organisations, as they deregulated the economy and destroyed hundreds of thousands of manufacturing jobs. Enterprise bargaining, introduced by Keating with the backing of the unions, divided workers up, factory by factory, to ensure that cost-cutting agreements could be pushed through at individual workplaces, without any prospect of industry-wide action.

As for Howard's industrial legislation, most of it was incorporated into the Fair Work Australia laws introduced by the Labor governments of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard. Fair Work, which was fully supported by the unions, bans virtually all industrial and collective action, and includes provisions for massive fines against workers who take up a struggle.

A fight against the restructure at AP, and the assault on the entire working class, can only go forward in opposition to Fair Work, the industrial courts, the political parties of big business, and the unions, which defend all of the above.

The fact that most strikes are illegal only demonstrates that a genuine struggle against the attacks on jobs and conditions is a political fight against the government and the political establishment.

This requires new workers' organisations. At Australia Post, this means the creation of an independent rank-and-file committee that will unite workers across the country, defeat the unions attempts to keep workers isolated and organise a genuine industrial and political fightback against the ADM and privatisation. Such a stand would win a powerful response from other sections of workers, who are facing a similar offensive against their rights and conditions.

Chaloner's comments at the meeting again demonstrate that the unions are the most bitter opponents of this perspective.

We appeal to AP workers who want to fight the restructure to contact the Socialist Equality Party at sep@sep.org.au



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact