

Unions try to cover up their role at Australia Post

Jim Franklin
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Facing mounting discontent among postal workers, which erupted in two recent meetings at Sydney's Alexandria delivery facility, the trade unions are desperately trying to rewrite their record of supporting and enforcing the hated Alternative Delivery Model (ADM) and Australia Post's restructuring.

As a result of the ADM, posties are often working 12-hour shifts and unable to complete their delivery rounds, known as beats. The use of casual and contract labour is increasing, and workers who have been on the job for decades are being forced out by over-work, resulting in the thousands of job cuts that management wants.

For the third time in a month, after not being seen for a year or more, a delegation of senior union bureaucrats arrived at the Alexandria facility last week, without notice to workers, to call a meeting. In the two previous meetings at the facility workers had challenged the unions' collaboration with management and the ADM, to which union officials had reacted with open hostility.

Last week, no less than four union officials fronted about 40 workers to attempt to stifle their anger over the ADM, which has created the intolerable working conditions. Communications Electrical Plumbers Union (CEPU) state secretary Shane Murphy was accompanied by assistant secretary Peter Chaloner, industrial officer Elly Huttley and organiser Dennis Williams.

In his opening remarks, Murphy claimed that the union had opposed the ADM from the start but could not call a strike because it was a "regulatory change" and industrial action was banned under workplace laws.

Then Murphy switched tack. He argued that the union had signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with management which allowed the ADM to proceed, in order to protect jobs, 25 percent of which management threatened to eliminate.

Both these claims are a sham.

From the beginning of the pandemic the unions worked hand-in-glove with the management. They were in closed-door meetings with the Liberal-National government's Communications Minister Paul Fletcher and the then Australia Post CEO Christine Holgate.

The resulting MoU, signed on July 7, includes a no-strike clause intended to ensure a smooth transition to the ADM. The deal enforced the main changes demanded by management, centred on the reduction of letter delivery in favour of parcel operations.

Fully aware of workers' opposition, the unions did not discuss the MOU at any meetings with union members before signing it. Instead, workers were informed after the fact, in two letters, one from management and the other from the CEPU and the Communications Workers Union (CWU).

The MoU commits the union to "co-operating with Australia Post to ensure the successful implementation" of the ADM. That includes "encouraging employees to operate new and different modes of delivery based on business requirements and refraining from taking any steps that would discourage employees from operating these modes."

The union also pledged to refrain from "taking any steps that would discourage employees from varying their start and finish times or reasonably varying their work location."

In other words, the union agreed to block workers from opposing onerous changes such as the redeployment of posties to the parcel sector and the creation of "floaters," who have no set job description and can be shunted from one area to another.

The Labor Party fully backed the MoU. In a joint statement, Labor's industrial relations spokesman Brendan O'Connor and communications spokeswoman Michelle Rowland falsely said union and Labor opposition had forced Australia Post "to make significant

concessions.”

Nothing could be further from the truth. Australia Post CEO Holgate publicly praised the unions for signing the MoU. She told the *Australian Financial Review* on July 7: “We look forward to continue to collaborate with the union as we implement the alternating letter deliveries in metropolitan areas and we welcome the CEPU’s recognition of the importance of this temporary change is to help Australia Post safeguard the business.”

Like all the unions, those covering postal workers always cite the anti-strike Fair Work industrial legislation, which the unions themselves helped draw up under the last Labor government of 2007 to 2013. These laws, banning all industrial action outside union-controlled enterprise bargaining periods, cement the role of the unions as industrial police forces.

Anxious to appease workers, Murphy declared that if the ADM was not “pruned back” next year “to suit us,” then “mark my words we’re going to launch industrial action.” This is just as much a fraud as his earlier statements. At the previous meetings at the facility, the union opposed calls from workers for mass meetings to fight the ADM, as well as for collective action to work only rostered hours.

When the next enterprise bargaining takes place in 2021 the union will do everything to prevent industrial action in favour of negotiating with management. The unions are not just idle spectators. They reinforce the legal framework they helped to establish and then come to meetings of angry workers and tell them there is nothing they can do, otherwise workers will face massive fines or jail for taking unlawful strike action.

Murphy said workers had to put faith in winning over right-wing senators who hold the balance of power in the Senate. He reported he had sat in the offices of the anti-immigrant One Nation Party’s Pauline Hanson and Independent Jackie Lambie to try to convince them to oppose the federal government’s regulatory changes associated with the ADM.

The parliament represents the interests of the ruling capitalist class. The unions’ grovelling to the likes of Hanson and Lambie is a warning that the unions will do everything in their power to subordinate workers to useless petition drives and bankrupt appeals to anti-working class forces such as these.

Workers end up paying the price of these sordid union-led manoeuvres with the destruction of thousands of jobs, as has been the case for years at Australia Post.

One worker angrily pointed out to union officials in the

meeting that senior management were going to do a walk through the facility the previous week accompanied by the union. But then changed their minds and didn’t need to do a walk through because, “they know exactly what’s going on and couldn’t give a rats about us.”

Another said the ADM would not be reversed, as Murphy claimed, as too much was invested in its outcome and so much already had changed.

In order to fight the ADM and stop the restructuring and planned privatisation of Australia Post, the Socialist Equality Party has issued a call for the building of rank-and-file committees to take matters out of the hands of the union and unite all postal workers in a common struggle.

As the statement explains: “This is a political struggle against the government, Labor, the unions and corporations. It requires the unity of Australia Post workers across the country and a turn to broader sections of the working class who face the same big business onslaught.”

Any concerted, unified campaign will come face to face with the necessity of a fight to abolish the industrial laws that act as a straitjacket, enforced by the unions, to suppress the working class. This is a political struggle, as workers will inevitably confront attacks not only by management but governments, the media and the state apparatus, as well as the sabotage of the union bureaucracy.

Moreover, workers must challenge the mantra of management, echoed at every turn by union bureaucrats, that sacrifice is needed to ensure that businesses remain viable. As the SEP statement explained: “A new political perspective is needed which rejects the dominance of corporate profit interests over every aspect of society.”

“The alternative is the fight for a workers’ government and a socialist program. Australia Post must be placed under genuine public ownership and democratic workers’ control along with all other utilities, the banks and the corporations. The workers, who produce all of the wealth, must run society, not a tiny capitalist oligarchy that is plunging the world into ever-greater crisis.

“The Socialist Equality Party offers every assistance to workers who want to fight the restructure at Australia Post and form their own organisations of struggle.”



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