

Australia Post workers condemn secret union-management negotiations for new enterprise agreement

Our reporters
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The Communication Electrical and Plumbers Union (CEPU) advised its members at Australia Post (AP) that it began backroom negotiations with management this week for a new workplace Enterprise Agreement (EA) at the state-owned postal facility.

In an email yesterday, the union complained that management had rejected its proposals for a return to regular start times, which have been substantially altered with the rollout over the past year of an Alternative Delivery Model (ADM). The CEPU touted a recent trial of previous start times, declaring that it had improved “productivity, attendance hours, overtime hours and cost per article.”

While issuing some bluster against management, the union made clear that it is willing to continue its collaboration with AP. Over the past 12 months, the CEPU has imposed the largest restructure in APs history, creating intolerable conditions for workers and focusing the businesses activities on the lucrative parcel sector, in preparation for its privatisation.

For all their claims to oppose the ADM, the CEPU, behind the backs of their members, signed a “memorandum of understanding” with management last June providing for its implementation and banning any industrial action by workers.

The CEPU email demonstrated that the union will continue this pro-company role. It stated that during negotiations “there was robust and fairly genuine early discussions about what an actual legitimate future sustainable operating model could look like, how our members could play a genuine role in the development of that model and the extent of which the Federal Government’s workplace bargaining policy would, or would not, apply to Australia Post and how that may affect wage outcomes—if at all.”

In other words, everything is on the table, and negotiations are proceeding on the basis of what AP management and the government want, as they step up their restructuring offensive. Moreover, while the union claims to oppose any

extension of the ADM, the horse has already bolted. And it is directing workers’ hostility to the restructure behind the big business Labor Party, which is no less committed to privatisation and further “productivity measures” than the government.

The email stated: “Australia Post outlined that they are not seeking substantial changes to the current Agreement on their end, other than to update matters for compliance purposes. We at least see this as a positive, subject to the detail of what those compliance matters actually are.” This is a declaration that the CEPU is not going to fight for any improvement in conditions, after the worst 12-month period for posties in decades.

The backroom talks underscore the importance of a statement issued by the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee last month. The committee has called for a break with the unions and an independent political and industrial struggle by workers around a clear set of demands, including a complete end to the ADM or any version of it, the restoration of all lost conditions, a 10 percent per annum wage rise with no trade-offs, and no privatisation.

The WSWs recently spoke to several workers who support this call.

One of them stated: “I think the demands cover some basic unresolved issues facing postal workers. They give a voice to what is actually happening on the coal face. They begin with what is necessary for us and not what ‘is possible’ as far as the crumbs Australia Post management, the government and the unions may brush our way. I think they are based on social equality and place our health and livelihoods in order of first rank, rather than profits. I think it is important that we have a voice framed in demands instead of always having things forced upon us.

“To develop the struggle for the realisation of the demands will require a political education for postal workers. It will require the building of the Postal Workers Rank and File Committee and an understanding that this is our fight. We

can no longer outsource our responsibility to fight for our future to unions and delegates and committees who have no interest in upsetting the status quo. Postal workers need to step up to the plate and shoulder this struggle.

“Through the unions we have gone backwards. Management’s steamroller has not even been slowed down. The union has paved the way for the further rolling back of our conditions.

“The closed-door discussions around the new EBA are the modus operandi of the union leaders and their supporters. They discuss, they sign off and then, at the last minute, they show us something they have already agreed upon and demand we sign off. We have been and continue to be excluded from any process that affects us including the EBA.”

Another declared: “The demands made by the postal rank and file committee are just and earnest to all Australia Post workers. Major issues such as the chaotic ADM model, low-wage growth and overpaid management are addressed by the demands.

“To win these demands need the full support of postal workers. The demands need to be adopted, discussed and taken seriously because together we can make it happen.

“The union will no doubt treat these demands as folly and argue against any serious discussion of them. They will say to leave the fight with them, to trust in them as they continue to bargain our rights away for less and less gain. This fight needs to be by worker for workers.

“The closed door discussion between the union and executive management exposed by the WSWS article are disgusting but not surprising. It is a direct betrayal of its members and further shows the union hasn’t the power or the motive to fight for improved workers’ rights and conditions.

“Postal services need genuine socialist public ownership and worker control because it is a service vital to many Australian communities and does provide essential connection via the letters and parcel services.

“There is far more loyalty and experience in the thousands of hours worked by Australia Post’s frontline staff who actually move the product around and engage with the community. This is in stark contrast to the few years spent by CEOs and executive board members who cut services and standards in order to earn their bonuses before they jump ship and move on to other ventures.”

A third worker, with several decades of experience in industry, condemned the CEPU’s promotion of Labor. He recalled that, “Since the Hawke and Keating government came to power in 1983, the program of the Labor and unions has been pro-business restructuring. This program has led to the destruction of hundreds of thousands of full time jobs.

“Over that nearly 40-year period, the Labor and unions have sabotaged every attempt by the working class to fight back against the job destruction. That shows the fight at AP and everywhere else needs to be waged by workers independently of Labor and the unions.”

A fourth worker spoke about the CEPU’s attempts to channel the anger of AP staff behind fruitless appeals to the federal parliament, which is claims can be convinced to block an extension of government regulation required for the ADM to proceed.

The worker said, “The union has done its survey on the ADM, where many workers pointed to how bad it is, and has presented some of the findings to the latest parliamentary inquiry. The CEPU is more interested in trying to sway and convince the Senate that they should oppose the ADM than on doing anything else.

“But these appeals to parliament haven’t stopped the government and AP management from implementing the ADM, with the help of the CEPU. As we knew from the beginning of this pandemic crisis, this was used as the excuse to start the process of privatisation.

“I don’t think we are going to stop the ADM and this privatisation process through the Senate. I don’t have any faith in the unions. They have led us on a wild goose chase into the Senate and it’s a dead end. The CEPU refused to take on AP management when they went to the government asking for regulatory change to facilitate the ADM and they refused to fight the government when it introduced it. Then they stood by and watched as the changes were made and told us we couldn’t take any action against it.

“I think we need to organise mass industrial and political action of postal workers. And I think that if we are to be successful, we will need to unite our fight with workers everywhere. The statement I read explains this quite well: ‘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.’

“That pretty much sums it up, that is why I support the rank and file committee; it’s the only organisation fighting to do that.”



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