Hundreds of Australian broadband technicians stop work

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Hundreds of Australian broadband technicians have walked off the job in recent days in protest over low pay, "pyramid" contracting and an unworkable job scheduling platform.

The Communications Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU) has staged a series of protests in an effort to divert the anger of workers behind the corporatised unions and the Labor Party in the lead-up to the next federal election. The aim is to prevent a broader movement of workers across the logistics and telecommunications sectors amid stepped-up pro-business restructuring, and to direct the contractors back behind union-company negotiations.

The stoppages began on May 3, when technicians from New South Wales demonstrated outside the North Sydney headquarters of NBN Co, the publicly-owned corporation responsible for Australia's National Broadband Network, followed later in the week by protests outside a communications conference in Sydney attended by NBN Co executives.

Workers in Melbourne marched through the Victorian capital on May 6 to protest in front of the NBN Co head office and a major NBN Co contractor BSA. Technicians in Adelaide began demonstrating on Tuesday, ahead of Wednesday's so-called "national day of action" involving workers in Brisbane as well as the other three capitals.

In a cynical move deliberately engineered to minimise its impact, the "national day of action" was announced on the union's Facebook page just 12 hours before the protests began. Most of the previous events were only publicised after they were already underway.

At the May 5 Sydney rally, CEPU national secretary Shane Murphy stood beside Labor MP Michelle Rowland as she decried the "immorality" of the "highly remunerated executives at NBN Co." Rowland said: "Shane is absolutely right. This requires parliamentary scrutiny."

Rowland did not mention that the company's executive remuneration in 2020 was only 12 percent higher in real terms than when the NBN rollout commenced under the Gillard Labor government in 2011.

In the 2018–19 financial year, a combined $3.28 million was handed to the chief executive and executive committee under the company's STI bonus scheme. Between July and December last year company executives received bonuses totalling $4.33 million.

The CEPU's call for a parliamentary inquiry and its promotion of illusions in the Labor party are attempts to pull the wool over workers' eyes. The corporatisation and privatisation of public utilities including telecommunications began under the Hawke-Keating Labor government in the 1990s, and has been facilitated at every turn by the unions.

Following the initial demonstrations, Murphy announced on May 6 that the technicians can "celebrate their first win." The so-called "win" was a vague, non-binding deal reached with only one of NBN Co's delivery partners Lendlease. It agreed to "facilitate a pathway" to direct engagement of subcontractors, knocking out the middle subcontractor.

Murphy announced that the union had commenced talks with NBN Co delivery partners BSA and Visionstream on their pyramid contract arrangements but was unable to secure a meeting with a fourth delivery partner, Service Stream.

NBN Co contracts work to delivery partners, which subcontract that work to principal contractors, which in turn subcontract the work again or hire poorly paid, under-skilled workers. Technicians say they are now being forced to sign new contracts at lower pay rates as

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the principal contractors take a cut of 30-40 percent.

In doing deals with NBN Co's delivery partners, the CEPU is endorsing the company's reliance on exploited "independent" subcontractors and blocking a genuine fight to place workers' interests ahead of corporate profits.

In fact, the very existence of the pyramid contracting model is a direct result of the union's role in enforcing the decimation of permanent jobs in the industry over decades.

Since the late 1990s, the CEPU has actively collaborated with Telstra management, as the formerly state-owned telecommunications giant shed tens of thousands of permanent jobs in favour of precarious casual and contract labour. Those workers who kept their jobs have repeatedly been forced to accept "pay rises" below the level of inflation in enterprise agreements negotiated by the union.

NBN workers told the Nine Network's "A Current Affair" that they were paid as little as $50-80 for jobs that could take up to four hours to complete. In addition, the technicians are responsible for all their own business costs including tools, test equipment, insurance and ongoing training.

Workers are also frustrated by the NBN Co's job dispatch platform, which they have to interact with via an app. According to the technicians, it can take up to three hours to book-off work, forcing them to work longer hours and causing them to miss scheduled appointments, generating multiple complaints from customers.

While recent changes to the job scheduling platform have worsened the plight of technicians, NBN Co's corporate structure and multi-tiered contracting model have been in place since its inception under the Labor governments of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard.

Construction on the $57 billion publicly-funded NBN commenced in 2011. Its aim was to provide high speed internet connections to households and businesses across Australia by replacing the ageing copper cable network with high speed optic fibre.

With the project already behind schedule, in 2013 the newly elected Abbott Liberal-National government abandoned the original plan and opted for a lower speed connection which utilised the inferior existing copper cable network to speed up construction of the network.

In December last year, Communications Minister Paul Fletcher prematurely declared the national broadband network rollout complete and fully operational. Around 35,000 Australian residences are still not connected to the NBN and at least a further $3.5 billion is required to build the fibre out to the parts of the network still on the old copper connections.

The formal declaration by the communications minister of completion of the NBN was important to overcome a legal hurdle to the eventual privatisation of the network.

NBN Co has already begun preparations to make the company attractive to any potential buyers. Last July, CEO Stephen Rue said the company would slim down the size of its direct workforce from around 6,200 employees to roughly 5,400 people by the end of 2020. The company's focus will shift from building the network to generating an income through marketing and retail.

The company expects to generate $4.5 billion in revenue by the end of the 2020–21 financial year. Average revenue per customer is $45 a year but NBN Co aims to increase it to $49 by the end of the 2022–23 financial year.

The CEPU's track record demonstrates that it will not mount a genuine fight against the privatisation of NBN Co or for the fair pay and conditions of the workers essential to its operation.

These tasks require a break with the unions and the formation of independent rank-and-file committees in all sections of industry to fight for socialist policies, according to which critical public utilities, along with banks and other major corporations, would be placed under public ownership and democratic workers' control.

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