

End of Alternative Delivery Model hailed by union as Australia Post prepares fresh assault for workers

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Wednesday June 30 marked the official end of the Alternative Delivery Model (ADM) at Australia Post (AP), but neither management nor the union have advanced a clear plan on what this means for workers.

The only concrete detail released so far is that, from July 1, posties will have to resume delivering “priority” letters on top of their existing workloads, which increased dramatically under the ADM.

The Communications Electrical Plumbers Union (CEPU) has hailed the supposed end of the much-hated ADM as an “incredible achievement” and is now promoting illusions that all of the attacks on postal workers’ conditions over the last year will soon be reversed.

The union held an online meeting on June 22, just eight days before the end of the ADM, in which CEPU national president Shane Murphy spoke about preparations for what he repeatedly referred to as a “rollback.” What he outlined, however, was nothing of the sort. This is a deliberate move to blind workers to fresh attacks under the new delivery model currently being developed.

It is telling that in an email sent the following day, Rod Barnes, AP’s executive general manager deliveries, told workers “We’re working with the CEPU and CWU [Communications Workers Union] on a new delivery model.” This indicates that, far from a “rollback,” management and the unions are collaborating on a revision of the ADM that will bring about a new assault on postal workers’ conditions.

While the CEPU insists that the end of the ADM will bring about a return to “one run per postie,” Murphy made clear that this would depend on beats being expanded to allow management to extract maximum value from its employees.

“As we go back to everyday delivery,” Murphy said, “it’s important we have our rounds recast and modelled to ensure, as we decline in letters, we’re ensuring we’re picking up enough product to maintain our full-time jobs.”

Three sites have been selected as trial locations for development of the new model: Preston, Victoria; Ingleburn, New South Wales; and Coorparoo, Queensland. These sites will be the first to see the establishment of local working groups (LWGs) comprising management, union representatives and postal workers.

In complete contradiction to his claim that the new delivery

model is a “rollback” to pre-ADM conditions, Murphy outlined how these groups would “recast and redo all the rounds,” and consider “will it be motorcycle, will it need to be EDV [electric delivery vehicle], how many V sort frames do we need?”

Murphy claimed that the LWGs this time around would be unlike “this one-way street like we saw under the ADM rollout, where the local working groups were set up, dictated to by management.” This, Murphy said, was because the LWGs would be subject to oversight by a national working group (NWG), itself made up of union representatives and senior management.

The lesson the CEPU has drawn from the ADM rollout debacle is that the union must be centrally involved in the new delivery model. The mechanism for this is the NWG, which Murphy said, will “oversee any issues and disputes that emerge in the LWGs.”

Australia Post workers be warned! The establishment of these groups is an attempt by the union to integrate layers of workers in corporatist mechanisms tasked with carrying out the demands of government and management for a major restructuring of Australia Post. These “groups”—and any worker who joins them—will be required to devise and oversee the implementation of the increased exploitation of their fellow workers.

After affording these workers a token opportunity to air grievances, the company will ram through whatever changes it deems necessary to maximise profitability. The union will then use the imprimatur of the handful of workers in the groups to suppress opposition among the broader workforce. The LWGs will become a form of police force for management and the union itself against posties.

Neither Murphy nor the AP management has explained how, with a reduced workforce resulting from a wave of resignations with the introduction of the ADM, deliveries will be possible in the existing rosters.

The implementation of the new delivery model is also bound up with ongoing negotiations for the next enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) at AP. The union’s false promises that conditions will improve with the end of the ADM are aimed at suppressing worker unrest during the narrow window in which strikes are permitted under Australia’s draconian, union enforced, industrial relations laws.

At last week’s meeting, Murphy told workers that the union would make an ambit claim for a “five or six” percent pay rise but

was doubtful “we’ll get that far.” Murphy’s only firm commitment to workers on pay was, “We ain’t coppin’ their two percent or their one percent bonuses anymore.” In other words, posties can expect an annual pay rise that, at best, matches inflation, and certainly not enough to make up for years of miserly increases rammed through by the CEPU.

While the ADM has certainly been the source of much anger and frustration for posties, the government’s abandonment of the model has nothing to do with the interests of workers or with email campaigns and political lobbying carried out by the union.

The reality is that the ADM has been an utter failure. In the second half of 2020, consumer complaints about delivery delays, poor quality delivery and lost items by Australia Post increased by 81 percent, according to the Commonwealth Ombudsman.

It is the failure of ADM to achieve the objectives of management and government—chiefly the bolstering of AP’s highly profitable parcel delivery business in preparation for a future sell off—that has prompted the call for a new delivery model to be developed.

The ADM was introduced in July last year, after the state-owned postal service was granted Temporary Regulatory Relief (TRR) by the federal government, allowing the suspension of priority mail and daily letter delivery.

At the same time, the CEPU assured management it would enforce the introduction of the ADM and suppress any discontent from workers, signing a memorandum of understanding, including a 12-month ban on strikes.

While the ADM was ostensibly introduced as a temporary response to the COVID-19 pandemic, a reduction in delivery frequency has long been discussed as a means of cutting costs as letter mail becomes a smaller and smaller share of AP’s revenue. At the same time, the parcel delivery business has boomed with the rise in online shopping and increasingly been treated as a separate business within Australia Post, keeping the door open for partial privatisation.

The real response of both management and the CEPU to the coronavirus pandemic has been to cover up COVID-19 infections within AP facilities. As “essential” workers, posties have continued to work throughout the pandemic.

By forcing posties to work two different beats, the ADM has increased the risk of exposure and transmission as workers interact with two sets of customers on alternate days before returning to work in close quarters inside their facility. The introduction of “floaters”—postal workers who are shunted from one depot to another as management demands—further increased the risk of transmission between facilities.

With the more dangerous Delta variant now circulating in six of Australia’s eight states and territories, postal workers are again highly exposed because there has been no attempt to offer them priority in the country’s disastrous vaccine rollout.

Whatever the CEPU claims, a “rollback” to pre-ADM conditions is neither possible nor desirable. Even before last year’s sweeping changes, AP workers were suffering under the weight of decades of attacks carried out by management with the full support of the union.

The livelihoods of workers at AP, as in all other industries, cannot be left in the hands of the unions, which have demonstrated

through betrayal after betrayal that they exist to enforce the dictates of management and suppress genuine opposition to attacks on workers’ pay and conditions.

The Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee (PWRFC) calls on workers to reject the LWGs and NWG and oppose any attempt by management and the union to enlist sections of workers to enforce the destruction of the conditions of the entire workforce.

Instead, rank-and-file committees should be formed at each AP facility, independent of management and the union, and meetings organised to recast beats and assign transport modes according to the preferences of posties and with health and safety as the top priority. If this requires the establishment of new beats and the hiring of additional posties, then workers must demand that management carries this out.

All casual and part-time employees must be offered full-time positions as the first step to overcoming the chronic staff shortages posties have suffered for years as a result of years of cost-cutting even before the ADM.

The PWRFC demands that vaccinations immediately be made available to all AP workers, on company time and with no loss of income or sick leave if time is needed to recover from any side effects.

While the CEPU has indicated it will settle for anything over 2 percent, the PWRFC demands 10 percent wage increases per year, with absolutely no trade-offs. Postal workers must receive a living wage to meet the escalating cost of living.

AP workers must make a conscious break with the CEPU, with its false promises and phoney “working groups,” and instead fight to build the PWRFC, a genuine organisation of rank-and-file workers committed to defending the jobs and basic rights of postal workers.

Contact the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee at auspostalworkers@gmail.com.



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