

Oppose union's sell-out deal at Australia Post

Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee
18 August 2021

The Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee (PWRFC) calls on workers to vote “NO” for EBA 2021 and oppose the underhanded attempt by the Communications, Electrical and Plumbers Union (CEPU) to impose a sell-out enterprise agreement (EA) at Australia Post (AP). Ballot papers have now been sent out for the postal vote, which closes on August 27.

After reaching an “in-principle agreement” (IPA) on the new EA with AP management, the union promised to conduct meetings in which workers could discuss the agreement and raise questions prior to the vote. In a deliberate bid to suppress open discussion, and opposition to the IPA, the CEPU elected to carry out short briefings at individual workplaces, rather than online meetings open to the entire membership.

In response to the rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, this plan was abandoned as it was deemed too dangerous for union officials to visit AP facilities. By contrast, management and the union not only *allowed* AP employees to continue working at those same facilities, they actively intervened to ensure that New South Wales government restrictions did not apply to postal workers. As a result, AP workers have been forced to endanger their health, every day, in the country's most dangerous coronavirus hotspots.

The CEPU did not call a national online meeting for three weeks after announcing the IPA.

On Wednesday August 4, CEPU President Shane Murphy, along with other union officials and AP management figures, conducted two separate half-hour meetings to “discuss” the agreement and call on postal workers to approve it.

These meetings were anti-democratic and anti-worker through and through. How could workers freely ask questions, or object to the proposed EA, with management present? The character of these meetings—as sales pitches for the sell-out union-management deal—was a clear demonstration of the orientation of the CEPU as an industrial police force of management.

The meetings were announced to members the previous night, in a text message from the union, which did not contain a link to the meetings, but to a CEPU “how to vote” page, instructing workers to vote “yes.”

At some facilities, television screens were put up to allow members to watch the livestream, but workers were only able to ask questions or raise concerns by logging in on their phones, via QR codes, passed around on the morning of the meeting. The timing of the meetings, at 6:30 a.m. and 7:30 a.m., during working hours, was chosen to ensure postal workers would not be able to participate fully.

Murphy lauded the deal and claimed the 3 percent per annum

wage rise was above average, compared to that of other government workers. He added that, taking into account superannuation increases, the deal would net workers an 18.4 percent increase in “total monetary benefits,” over the course of the EA. This is a completely disingenuous attempt to double-count the 3 percent pay rise. In fact, there is no separate increase to superannuation under the IPA.

The 3 percent wage deal is a pay cut in real terms. The Consumer Price Index (CPI) has increased by 3.79 percent, since the second quarter of 2020, and is continuing to rise.

The IPA does nothing to reverse the attacks we have endured for years under successive agreements, which have seen the wages and conditions of postal workers decline. The fact is, this agreement continues the descent.

The CEPU claims 3 percent is above the going rate, but we take no comfort from the fact that our brothers and sisters in other industries and government sectors have also been sold out by their unions. In addition to pay cuts, these workers have endured privatisation and massive job cuts, overseen and implemented by the unions and Labor governments.

The union has claimed that the Terms of Reference (TOR), worked out in closed-door discussions with management, will protect jobs, but it does no such thing. Instead, the entire emphasis is on facilitating further restructuring, which will inevitably entail retrenchments and cuts to conditions.

The TOR, dated July 13, but not made available to workers until August 2, states in clause 3.2 that, under the new delivery model: “The NWG [National Working Group] will be responsible for developing a framework for delivery operations that: ... (c) provides Australia Post with ongoing sustainability, flexibility, profitability and service reliability; (d) meets the current and future needs of Australia Post and the Australian community; ... (g) provides Australia Post with the necessary framework to remain competitive in the markets in which it operates; (h) ensures that Australia Post can continue to invest and grow for the future.”

The TOR goes on to state, in clause 3.3: “The Parties acknowledge that the needs of Australia Post, its customers and the community will continue to evolve over time, particularly as letters continue to decline, and there will be an ongoing need to review the delivery model, from time to time, in accordance with changes to Australia Post's business, to ensure it meets community and customer expectations as well as meeting the CSO [community service obligations]. The Parties commit to conducting a joint review on the delivery model, achieved under this TOR, no later than 18 months from execution of this TOR.”

In other words, the CEPU is committing workers to an ongoing

restructuring process, demanded by management to provide “Australia Post with ongoing sustainability, flexibility, profitability and service reliability” at the expense of jobs and working conditions.

The union’s orientation was starkly demonstrated last year when the CEPU went behind workers’ backs to sign a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with management, pledging to enforce the Alternative Delivery Model (ADM). The MOU included a 12-month no-strike clause, designed to ensure the workers’ anger did not disrupt the transition to the ADM.

Under the ADM, postal workers were assigned two beats instead of one, which they worked on alternate days, substantially increasing the volume of mail each worker had to deliver. Thousands of posties were transferred from letter mail to parcel delivery, while others were made “floaters,” who could be moved from one duty to another and shunted between facilities, in order to satisfy the operational demands of AP with the minimum number of workers.

All of this took place under the previous union-management agreement, which is identical to the IPA, now being pushed by the CEPU, in all aspects other than the paltry wage rise.

The CEPU enthusiastically promoted the official end of the ADM as a victory for postal workers. The reality is, the new delivery model is driven by the same motivations—maximising profitability and preparing AP’s lucrative parcel division for privatisation.

The TOR makes clear that this process will be overseen and determined by a steering committee, comprising senior AP management and union leaders. This is far from “rank and file workers” having a say in the development of the new delivery model, through Local Working Groups (LWGs), as the union has previously claimed.

The LWGs, which will include representatives of management and the CEPU, as well as postal workers, will be empowered only to “apply the levers” established by the steering committee and the NWG.

The real purpose of the LWGs is to integrate a small set of workers into the restructuring offensive, to provide a phoney stamp of approval for whatever changes management decides to implement. Workers should reject with contempt this move to involve them in the increased exploitation of themselves and their co-workers.

This is a sell-out deal, in line with decades of EAs imposed by unions in every industry including AP. Working people have seen their conditions eviscerated and the destruction of permanent jobs under the enterprise bargaining system, established by Labor and the unions.

In the past four decades, the unions have been completely transformed into pro-corporatist adjuncts of management. These organisations in no way represent the interests of the working class.

The PWRFC urges all AP workers to vote “NO” on the proposed EA, which will only continue the exploitation of postal workers and deepen the assault on pay and conditions. We call on postal workers to join the PWRFC and build rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, in their own workplaces.

The PWRFC demands:

- COVID-19 Vaccinations must immediately be made available to all postal workers, on company time and with no loss of income or sick leave, if time is needed to recover from any side effects. No worker should be forced to work without having received at least one vaccine shot. Postal workers must be issued with medical-grade personal protection equipment while in depots and doing deliveries.

- Pre-emptive COVID-19 testing must be made available at all AP sites, for all workers. Any workers who return a positive result, or are deemed close contacts, must self-isolate and be given all the necessary material and medical support to ensure a full recovery.

- Rank-and-file committees must be elected, independent of management and the unions, to organise and fight for the protection of workers’ health and safety. These committees will give regular reports to the workers and make the necessary recommendations.

- 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.

- All fixed-term contract workers and casuals must be given full-time positions.

- Increase full-time staff to deal with extra parcels and reduce the workload on existing staff.

- One beat, one postie. Recast beats on the basis of finishing within rostered hours. Rank-and-file committees must be established to plan and control the organisation of beats and other aspects of production.

- Increase annual leave by two weeks. Return the Authorised Holiday to the Christmas period, as previously established.

- These measures have to be financed by expropriating the profits extracted from Australia Post workers.

- Australia Post must be transformed into a genuine public utility, under real public ownership and the democratic control of the working class, to meet the needs of society, including the basic social right to a secure and affordable postal service.

Securing these demands will require a political fight, not just against management and the unions, but against Australia’s draconian anti-strike laws and all the major political parties, which defend them.

This must be the first step in a political and industrial struggle to place Australia Post and other essential services under democratic workers’ control, and fight for a socialist reorganisation of the economy, based on satisfying human need and securing workers’ social rights.

We invite all AP and other delivery workers to contact us to discuss this perspective.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact