

Australia: 2,000 StarTrack truck drivers strike over pay and job security

Jim Franklin
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Around 2,000 truck drivers at StarTrack, a parcel, freight and logistics company owned by Australia Post (AP), held a 24-hour national strike on Thursday, September 23.

As part of negotiations for a new enterprise agreement (EA), the workers are demanding a limit on outsourcing and for labour-hire casuals to receive the same pay and entitlements as permanent employees. According to the Transport Workers Union (TWU), outsourcing at some StarTrack facilities has reached as high as 70 percent.

The workers are also seeking a wage increase greater than the company's current offer of 3 percent per annum. The union has not publicly specified what figure it is demanding, meaning that anything above 3 percent will likely be touted as a "victory," even if it falls short of the recently announced official CPI increase of 3.8 percent.

The dispute takes place in an atmosphere of mounting anger throughout the trucking industry. Around 4,000 Toll drivers struck for 24 hours on August 27, and thousands of workers at Linfox, Bevchain have also recently voted in favour of protected industrial action. Another 3,000 workers at FedEx struck for 24 hours on Thursday.

These major transport companies are increasingly employing workers on short-term contracts, effectively creating a two-tier system to undermine the conditions of full-time drivers. This includes changes to shifts and the allocation of work to casuals and contractors, rather than giving overtime hours to full-time workers.

Despite the common grievances of workers throughout the transport industry, the TWU has isolated the strikes to one company at a time, minimising disruption to the supply chain. Although more than a month has passed since the Toll strike, and none of the

issues have been resolved, the union has barely mentioned the company's name and has presented no plan for further action at Toll.

Speaking outside StarTrack's Minchinbury, Western Sydney facility, on September 23, TWU National Secretary Michael Kaine claimed that these attacks on workers' conditions were the result of Australia's major trucking companies coming under "incredible commercial pressure" from international competitors such as Amazon Flex.

Kaine continued: "These companies, like StarTrack and others, have traditionally been good companies. With these workers, they have built up good secure jobs."

Highlighting the union's close alignment with management, Kaine invited StarTrack to "go to the federal government together and fix this Amazon effect." Kaine issued a similar invitation to Toll's management during the August 27 strike.

The TWU's campaign against Amazon has nothing to do with defending the rights of gig-economy workers—probably the most exploited layer in the transport industry—but is instead directed at shoring up the profitability of Australia's multi-billion dollar trucking companies.

The nationalist line that "good" Australian companies must be defended against their overseas rivals serves only to pit Australian workers against their counterparts internationally. The struggle to defend pay and conditions at StarTrack, Toll and elsewhere will not be won through appeals to the Australian ruling class, but through a turn to the global working class.

Kaine was careful to reassure management that the union would continue to enforce the company's use of casual and contract labour in "peak" periods. Kaine said: "Always in our agreements, there is the flexibility

for the company to be able to hire more workers, truckies, sortation workers in to deal with those peaks.”

The reality is, the growth in online shopping due to COVID-19 lockdowns has seen StarTrack and AP operating at “peak” levels year round. Rather than responding to this surge with the creation of new full-time jobs, the companies have seized upon the pandemic as an opportunity to entrench the massively increased use of contractors, usually reserved for Christmas and Easter, as standard operating procedure. This is a direct product of the “flexibility” Kaine defends as an unquestionable feature of every EA enforced by the TWU.

This month AP announced annual profits of more than \$100 million before tax and a 10.3 percent revenue increase to \$8.27 billion. StarTrack’s volumes increased by 12.2 percent over this period, making it AP’s most profitable division.

Both the TWU and the Communication Electrical Plumbers Union (CEPU), which covers most AP workers, have signed sell-out EAs for years that have resulted in the decline of workers’ conditions and pay.

Last year, under the guise of the pandemic, the CEPU worked with AP management to implement restructuring by introducing the Alternative Delivery Model (ADM), which doubled the workload of postal workers. This model could only be introduced because the CEPU signed a Memorandum of Understanding behind workers’ backs. This agreement contained a no-strike clause and served as a guarantee that the union would enforce the ADM.

Last month, the CEPU rammed through another sell-out EA at AP which offered a meagre 3 percent per annum wage rise—really a pay cut in view of inflation and the fact that workers did not receive a pay rise at all in 2020—and committed workers to ongoing restructuring.

Along with the previous EAs, these deals have allowed management to increase the use of casuals and contractors to replace full-time jobs. Far from representing the interests of workers, the enterprise bargaining system implemented by the Hawke-Keating Labor governments has been a mechanism to divide workers and tie them to the demands of their employers.

The unions, which fully support this anti-worker system, have acted as an industrial police force,

imposing this straitjacket on the working class.

This is highlighted at AP by the fact that the TWU and CEPU have refused to organise any joint action to defend workers’ conditions, even though AP workers and StarTrack drivers were undergoing EA negotiations simultaneously.

StarTrack management is seeking to drive a wedge between the workers and is trying to undermine the action by StarTrack drivers. It is using the fact that one section of the workforce, under the CEPU, has signed a new EA and is now receiving the first three percent wage rise, while those workers represented by the TWU have yet to do so and are therefore “missing out.”

This was highlighted in a flyer sent to employees by StarTrack management on August 31, the day after AP announced that workers had voted up the new EA.

The flyer stated: “Star Track has made it clear from the beginning that we will not be providing any greater pay offer than what we’ve offered to 30,000 Australia Post employees.... The TWU’s delays will cost you money and will hurt all Australians who are reliant on us at this challenging time.... Don’t let the TWU hold your pay rise to ransom over its industry campaign.”

The situation confronting StarTrack workers along with their brothers and sisters throughout the transport industry and AP is the product of decades of betrayals by the unions.

The way forward for workers to protect their jobs and conditions requires a break with the pro-company unions and the fight to establish independent rank-and-file committees in every workplace.

Through such committees, linked across industries, workers can develop and execute a coordinated plan of action to defeat the assault on their pay and conditions and defend the interests of the working class as a whole.

StarTrack workers, Amazon Flex drivers and all other transport and delivery workers are invited to contact the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee.



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