Australian union pushes sell-out deal for Toll truck drivers

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Workers at Toll, one of Australia's largest trucking companies, will vote on an "in-principle" enterprise agreement (EA) negotiated between management and the Transport Workers' Union (TWU).

The TWU announced the in-principle deal on Wednesday as a "HUGE WIN FOR TOLL WORKERS," [emphasis in original] deliberately preempting the vote by presenting the agreement as a fait accompli. The proposed EA was endorsed by union delegates in all states yesterday, but the rank-and-file are yet to vote.

Highlighting the close alignment of interests between management and the union, a Toll spokesperson said the company was "pleased" with the deal, which would provide "stability in very challenging times."

This announcement came less than a week after the news that workers across all of Australia's major trucking companies had voted to carry out a national 24-hour strike. The joint action was flagged after 24-hour strikes by around 10,000 workers across Toll, StarTrack and FedEx over the last two months, carefully timed by the TWU to isolate workers and ensure minimal disruption to the industry.

Clearly, there is mass opposition throughout the industry to stagnant pay, rampant outsourcing, tiered wages, dangerously long hours and other safety issues, all exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The August 27 strike at Toll was the first of its kind in the company's history, and it has been more than a decade since Australia has seen industrial action on this scale anywhere in the trucking industry.

In this context, the TWU's promotion of the proposed deal can only be seen as a sellout, not just of Toll workers, but of workers throughout the trucking industry. The union has made clear that it intends to ram through similar deals at the other "majors" and shut down any possibility of a broader strike.

TWU National Secretary Michael Kaine declared Wednesday: "This is a major victory for Toll workers and sets an important precedent for transport operators still denying reasonable job security protections for employees."

Kaine continued: "We implore StarTrack, FedEx, Linfox and BevChain to follow Toll's lead and commit to the reasonable protections workers are seeking."

The cynical character of the TWU's "#TruckieSolidarity" campaign is perhaps expressed most sharply in the situation now confronting workers at Global Express, formerly a division of Toll. Since the August 27 strike, the sale of Global Express to private equity firm Allegro has been finalised, forcing thousands of workers to begin EA negotiations again, with no possibility of joint action with the rest of the Toll workforce.

The TWU's declaration of victory contained few details of the proposed EA, which the union claims will bring gains: "Key job security provisions including site rates, commitments to give employees and owner drivers first preference over all available work, and caps on outside hire; 15% superannuation - an industry first; Improved consultation and auditing rights to further protect workers from their work being contracted out."

In fact, under the proposed agreement, Toll will be allowed to contract out up to 40 percent of work, enshrining the growing use of outside hire facilitated by successive union EAs. The TWU dropped its demand for these outsourced workers to be paid site rates, allowing management to maintain what amounts to a two-tier pay structure.

The 15 percent superannuation contribution represents an increase of just 0.25 points from the previous figure of 14.75. Given that the TWU has coverage over workers at all of Toll's main competitors, touting this or any condition as an "industry first" serves only to highlight the union's role in isolating workers and suppressing any fight for improved conditions across the whole industry.

According to the *Australian*, the proposed two-year EA offers a wage rise of 2.75 percent in the first year, less than the TWU's previous demand of 3 percent, which itself is well short of the rapidly increasing cost of living. While the pay rise in the second year is linked to inflation, it is limited to 4 percent, only slightly higher than Australia's current official rate of 3.8 percent, and less than the OECD average of 4.3 percent.

This pay "rise" is especially meagre given that Toll workers' wages were not increased at all in 2020, after the union agreed to suspend EA bargaining—and workers' right to strike—under the pretext of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Kaine, echoing similar comments he made at the recent strikes, said last week: "The pressure comes from the manufacturers, those on the top of the supply chain who engage the truck drivers to undertake the task. They've got so much commercial power that the companies sign onto contracts that are marginal and the drivers are pushed really hard."

In other words, the union is characterising the multi-billion-dollar trucking corporations, not as the perpetrators of an assault on workers' pay and conditions, but as the victims of a "squeeze" by "wealthy retailers" and the "existential threat to employers" from gig-economy delivery services such as Amazon Flex.

The reality is, the major Australian trucking companies have seen revenue soar during the pandemic. Toll took in $6.3 billion in the year to March 2021, almost one third higher than the previous year. StarTrack parcel volume increased by 12.2 percent in the last financial year, making it the most profitable division of Australia Post, which recorded revenue of $8.27 billion.

By contrast, the TWU has lauded Toll, Linfox, FedEx and StarTrack for providing, as Kaine claimed in May, "good jobs with decent standards that support working families."

The union's posturing about "job security" is not about protecting the jobs and conditions of workers, but about shoring up the profit interests of the major transport companies against competition from international players such as Amazon.

Speaking during the August 27 strike, Kaine promised Toll that, once the new deal was signed, management and the union would "go to the federal government, hand-in-hand," to demand legislative protection against the "Amazon effect."

The TWU is calling on the federal government to establish a "trucking industry watchdog," along similar lines as the Road Safety Remuneration Tribunal, which was swiftly dismantled in 2016 after it called for a small increase in drivers' wages.

The purpose of this type of bureaucratic mechanism is to promote the illusion that workers can defend their jobs, pay and conditions through appeals to capitalist governments and the state. Under conditions of mounting anger throughout the trucking industry, the ports and growing sections of the workers, the TWU's call is directed at suppressing any mass mobilisation of the working class.

Toll drivers should reject this in-principle agreement and the TWU's moves to contain the struggle of workers to individual companies.

What has taken place at Toll is part of a growing strike movement, not just in Australia's trucking industry and ports, but also internationally. This eruption of the class struggle is the product of decades of attacks on the working class, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

A fight to advance the interests of truck drivers at Toll and throughout the Australian trucking industry must be seen in this international context. Workers at Toll and Australia's other trucking companies should follow the lead of their brothers and sisters at Volvo, Dana and John Deere—break with the unions and form rank-and-file committees.

Through a network of such committees, across the trucking industry and the working class more broadly, workers can carry out a unified struggle to defeat the assault on their jobs, pay and conditions.

This perspective is intimately linked with a fight for a socialist future in which major transport businesses are placed under public ownership and democratic workers' control, so that they can be operated to serve human need rather than private profit.