

Australia: 2,000 StarTrack workers hold second 24-hour strike

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Around 2,000 truck drivers at StarTrack, a parcel, freight and logistics company owned by Australia Post, began a 24-hour national strike at midnight Wednesday. This is the second such stoppage conducted by the workers as part of negotiations for a new enterprise agreement (EA).

StarTrack has insisted it will not increase its pay offer of 3 percent, which is less than the current inflation rate of 3.8 percent, but higher than the meagre 2.75 percent endorsed by the union at Toll.

Workers are demanding a cap 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 strike was initially promoted by the Transport Workers Union (TWU) as a “national day of strike action” which would involve up to 10,000 workers from Toll, Linfox, FedEx and BevChain, as well as StarTrack.

It was clear from the outset that the TWU did not intend for this mass action to actually occur. Last week, before it had even set a firm date for the strike, the union endorsed a sell-out-deal at Toll.

Similar union-management deals were brokered in the last week at Linfox, BevChain and Global Express—formerly a division of Toll. The Global Express agreement contains pay “rises” of 2.5 percent this year and 3 percent from July 2022 and permits the company to contract out 40 percent of work. Linfox will be allowed to outsource 40 percent of distribution centre jobs and 30 percent of other work.

While no deal has been struck at FedEx, the TWU announced yesterday that strike action there would be “paused,” preventing a unified strike by workers at the two major parcel delivery companies.

In all of the recent disputes, the TWU has insisted that the major trucking corporations “like StarTrack and others, have traditionally been good companies. With these workers, they have built up good secure jobs.”

The union claims that the transport giants are the victims of a “squeeze” by major retailers and gig-economy

competitors like Amazon Flex. The in-principle agreements negotiated at Toll and Linfox contain pledges from management to go hand-in-hand with the union to the federal government to demand the establishment of a “safe rates” tribunal to fight the “Amazon effect.”

The TWU’s hostility to Amazon has nothing to do with advancing the interests of highly exploited Flex drivers, who are paid as little as \$27 an hour before expenses to deliver packages in their own vehicles for the online retail behemoth. Instead, the campaign is bound up with shoring up the profits of the major Australian transport companies.

The reality is, the growing use of casual and contract labour in the trucking industry has been allowed by successive enterprise agreements negotiated by the union.

The union’s dismantling of the industry-wide strike should come as no surprise. It is a continuation of the atomisation and isolation of workers demonstrated by the TWU throughout the recent months of negotiation in the transport industry.

Although workers throughout the industry confront the same issues, the union has ensured that when it has not been able to shut down workers’ demands for industrial action, stoppages have been carried out piecemeal, one company at a time, to ensure minimal disruption to the industry.

The fact that drivers across Australia’s major trucking companies have voted for strikes reflects mounting anger among workers over stagnant pay, fatigue and safety issues, attacks on conditions and the growing use of casual and contract labour in the industry.

According to a report published this month by the TWU, 41 percent of the 1,100 workers surveyed knew a driver who had been killed at work. One quarter had been involved in a crash while on the job and almost half had witnessed a serious accident. Nine people were killed in crashes involving trucks last week.

The TWU report quoted one driver as saying: “I work anywhere from 12-17 hours a day, up to 6 days a week... To put that into perspective, I’m fatigued every day I go to work, but I’m still expected to turn up and do the job.”

According to the *Sydney*

Morning

Communications Minister Paul Fletcher, responsible for the oversight of Australia Post and StarTrack, refused to attend a “pointless meeting” with the union last week.

Fletcher said: “To threaten a second strike action in the middle of a pandemic, when millions of Australians are doing their shopping online and relying on companies like StarTrack to deliver vital supplies to their home, is unconscionable.”

Over the last 18 months, the COVID-19 pandemic has been used by state and federal governments and big business as a pretext to demand increased output from workers, while at the same time attacking their pay and conditions and denying them basic workplace rights.

The unions have been at the forefront of this assault. In April 2020, Australian Council of Trade Unions secretary Sally McManus told business: “You can get everything you want through cooperation.”

The unions and Labor backed the JobKeeper scheme, which used public money to cover corporate wage bills—including those of companies that increased their profits—while also granting employers new powers to slash workers’ hours and vary their duties.

At StarTrack and most of the other major trucking companies, workers were due to negotiate a new enterprise agreement last year, but the TWU agreed to delay the bargaining period, committing workers to a pay freeze.

The unions have consistently opposed the imposition of any lockdown measures that would affect the continued operations and profits of business. At the height of the current New South Wales outbreak, when the state government announced greater restrictions for the worst-affected parts of Sydney, the TWU immediately demanded (and received) “a standing exemption which relieves transport workers from future snap policy changes which would prevent them from doing their jobs.”

This is what the TWU regards as a win for workers—being forced back to work under conditions where the Delta variant was completely out of control. This is a fact worth bearing in mind when reading the union’s declarations of victory in enterprise agreement negotiations.

The TWU, having actively lobbied for the health of workers and their families to be subordinated to the profit interests of multi-billion dollar transport companies, cannot possibly be trusted to fight for workers’ pay and conditions.

The international supply chain crisis, which stems not from industrial action, but from the inability of global capitalism to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, has demonstrated the indispensable role of logistics workers in today’s highly globalised economy.

This puts these workers in an immensely powerful position

to fight ~~for their~~ interests. The unions, desperate to maintain their position as the industrial police force of big business, are determined to quash this power through a campaign of isolation and suppression. At the start of this month, strikes were planned across Australia’s ports and roads, prompting hysterical denunciations of workers in the corporate press. Over the last three weeks, the Maritime Union of Australia and the TWU have systematically dismantled these planned actions, ramming through rotten deals or throwing workers in front of the pro-business Fair Work Commission.

The struggle for fair wages, safe working conditions and secure, permanent jobs in the trucking industry and throughout the working class requires a conscious break with the unions, and the formation of independent rank-and-file committees.

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. This includes a fight for a socialist program, in which the major transport companies, as well as the banks and utility companies will be placed under public ownership and democratic workers’ control, so that they can be operated to serve the needs of the entire working class, rather than the profit interests of the wealthy elite.

StarTrack workers, Amazon Flex drivers and all other transport and delivery workers are invited to contact the Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee to discuss this perspective here: austrialworkers@gmail.com.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)