

Australia Post workers oppose criminal “let it rip” COVID-19 policies

Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee
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With COVID-19 cases skyrocketing around the country, Australia Post (AP) workers face a growing risk of infection, illness and death. Along with other “essential” workers, throughout logistics, food distribution, and health, postal workers are forced to run the COVID-19 gauntlet every day as increasing numbers of their colleagues test positive for the virus.

This is a direct product of the criminal “let it rip” policies adopted by state, territory and federal governments, Labor and Liberal-National alike. Showing a blatant disregard for the health of the population and the workforce, these governments have torn down virtually all COVID-19 restrictions, eliminated testing requirements and dismantled contact tracing, allowing the virus to spread uncontrolled.

Australian governments and the corporate media have falsely claimed that Omicron is “mild,” going so far as to say that mass infection with the variant is not only inevitable, but desirable, claiming it could bring about an end to the pandemic.

The Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee rejects these dangerous lies, which are not based on science, but on the determination of the ruling class to open up the economy regardless of the toll of human suffering and death.

The Communications, Electrical and Plumbers Union (CEPU), like all other Australian trade unions, is utterly complicit in this murderous drive.

On December 15, when New South Wales (NSW) Premier Dominic Perrottet scrapped mask mandates, density limits, QR code check-ins and vaccine requirements, just as the highly contagious Omicron variant was beginning to take hold, the CEPU said nothing. Since that date, active COVID-19 cases in the state have swelled from 6,233 to 303,795 and 102 NSW residents have died from the virus.

In Victoria, public health measures were similarly lifted, as Labor Premier Daniel Andrews rejected a “zero Omicron” strategy. Andrews has played the key role in the nationwide turn away from any pretence of eliminating the virus since he declared on September 1, “we are not going to drive these numbers down.”

In line with the “national plan,” Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania and the Northern Territory, which together had reported only 3,587 infections prior to December, threw open their borders and have now recorded more than 150,000 cases.

Despite the profound danger confronting postal workers and the entire working class, the CEPU has allowed all this to happen without a single word of criticism or warning.

The CEPU’s silence is not just a matter of callous indifference to the health of workers and their families. The fact is, the union agrees completely with the reopening drive, which is a bipartisan assault on the working class engineered to ensure there is no impediment to big-business profits, whatever the human cost.

The “national cabinet” of state and federal governments, a majority of which are Labor, has approved the new definition of “close contacts” to include only household infections. What about workplaces where workers are often in “close contact” in poorly ventilated spaces! It is a naked move aimed at forcing potentially infectious workers to stay on the job and allowing its spread.

With workforces decimated by infection and exposure, governments are exploiting the consequences of their actions to further recklessly slash restrictions. Health and aged care workers exposed to COVID-19 have been ordered back to work, and on Sunday both the NSW and Queensland governments announced that isolation rules would be scrapped for food production and distribution workers.

Are postal workers next?

The testing regime inside Australia Post is completely inadequate. The absence of regular COVID-19 testing at most AP facilities means that asymptomatic carriers of the virus are not detected in the workplace.

The Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee is aware of multiple symptomatic infections in AP facilities at Alexandria and Kingsgrove in Sydney, as well as another depot in the Illawarra region. None of these cases has been reported to members by the CEPU, which continues to suppress information about the spread of the virus within AP, as it has done since the start of the pandemic.

In 2020, at least 50 COVID-19 infections among AP workers were covered up by the union and management, and only revealed months after the fact by then CEO Christine Holgate.

During last year’s Delta wave, AP was twice forced to suspend parcel pick-ups as a result of workplace infections or exposure. While the union remained silent, the company admitted in early September that this was because around 500 workers were infected or in isolation.

Six weeks earlier, the CEPU, along with numerous other unions, had successfully lobbied the NSW government to reverse heightened lockdown measures in Sydney’s COVID-19 hotspots. As a result, AP workers were forced to continue working in unsafe conditions.

Throughout the pandemic, the CEPU has served as the industrial police force of management, ensuring AP workers stayed on the job, day in and day out, delivering an ever-increasing volume of parcels under dangerous conditions.

In July 2020, the union colluded with management to implement the Alternative Delivery Model (ADM), doubling the workload of posties, freezing wages and committing workers to a 12-month ban on strikes.

Contrary to the claims of management, this had nothing to do with protecting workers from COVID-19. In fact, the major restructure was intended to slash costs and transform the company into a lucrative parcel service, in preparation for future privatisation.

While the CEPU claimed in July that the hated ADM would be “rolled back,” many facilities are still operating under the model, and its replacement, the “new delivery model,” is in reality yet another profit-driven transformation.

In the 2020–21 financial year, AP revenue increased by more than 11 percent, year-over-year, to \$8.27 billion, while profits almost doubled to \$100.7 million. Having delivered management this bonanza, the union then rammed through a sell-out enterprise agreement containing a meagre 3 percent annual pay rise and no protection against future restructuring.

Although aerosol transmission of COVID-19 is widely acknowledged by infectious disease experts, AP continues to provide only surgical masks, which do not provide adequate protection against this form of spread.

The CEPU opposes mandatory masks and vaccines, instead promoting “personal responsibility” and “the right of the individual” to choose. This is the opposite of the fundamental principle of a genuine workers’ organisation—solidarity! One might just as well argue that individuals have the right to choose to cross a picket line during a strike.

No individual, however “responsible,” can take on a global pandemic alone. But AP workers cannot take forward this life or death struggle within the union. The CEPU has made clear that it is entirely on board with the “let it rip” policies of governments and management.

The PWRFC rejects these criminal policies and the complicity of the union, and demands:

- N95 or better masks must be provided to all AP workers.
- Vaccinations and boosters must 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. This should be accompanied by an education campaign, conducted by appropriately qualified experts to address any concerns they may have about the safety of the vaccines.
- Any worker who refuses vaccination, must be furloughed to protect the workforce from possible infection.
- All workers should undergo rapid antigen tests before every shift, on company time and at AP’s expense.
- All COVID-19 infections among AP workers must be immediately reported to all staff.
- If workers test positive for COVID-19, a rank-and-file safety committee, independent of management and the union, will assess whether workplace transmission is occurring such that the facility

is unsafe and must be temporarily shut down.

- The unscientific redefinition of “close contacts” must be rejected. Workers must be allowed to isolate if they and the rank-and-file committee believe they have been exposed to COVID-19.
- Any worker infected with, or exposed to, COVID-19 must have all wages and entitlements paid in full while they isolate. No worker should be worse off as a result of the negligent policies of government and AP management.

We call for rank-and-file committees to be established at every AP facility, independent of management and the unions, to oversee these safety measures and report outbreaks to all AP workers.

Postal workers must turn to their class brothers and sisters throughout logistics and warehousing, who face identical dangers at the hands of company managements and the unions.

This struggle for health and safety cannot be waged at one workplace or in a single industry alone. It requires a broader movement of the working class, organised through an interconnected network of rank-and-file committees. Such a network can form the basis for democratic discussion among workers, free from the interference of the union bureaucrats, for sharing information and preparing concrete actions to defend safety, including strikes.

The claims that it is possible to “live with the virus” are being refuted everyday. The continued circulation of COVID really means that workers will die with the virus. The alternative is the fight for the global elimination of the coronavirus, through lockdowns and other safety measures, with full compensation for all affected workers.

The pandemic and the endangerment of workers’ lives for profit has demonstrated that the most basic social rights are incompatible with capitalism, a society dominated by the largest corporations and banks. The alternative is the fight for workers’ governments and socialism, the reorganisation of society to meet human needs, not the profit interests of a tiny financial oligarchy.

We appeal to postal workers to join the PWRFC and become active in the fight for the global elimination of COVID-19! Contact us with information about infections in your facilities!

The PWRFC urges workers to support the *World Socialist Web Site’s* Global Workers’ Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic, which aims to expose the criminal roles of governments, corporations and unions, which have subordinated public health to private profit and caused millions of unnecessary deaths.



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