

Oppose union-sanctioned monitoring and speedups at Australia Post!

Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee

17 July 2022

More than one year after the end of the Alternative Delivery Model (ADM) at Australia Post (AP) was announced, workers confront the reality of constant overtime, staff shortages and stepped-up monitoring of all aspects of their work.

The Sustainable Delivery Model (SDM) was promoted by the Communications Electrical and Plumbers Union (CEPU) as a return to a mythical pre-ADM golden age and the answer to all of posties' problems. In fact, the SDM is a revised attempt to restructure AP after the ADM failed to deliver on the demands of management and the federal government.

Management and the union have rammed through numerous changes designed to increase the power of management to monitor the work of posties and collect detailed performance data to be used as a disciplinary tool to demand ever-increasing output from workers.

The introduction of "sectioning" means that, before starting their delivery rounds, postal workers are required to sort and scan their parcels into blocks according to the sequence of their beats. Maximum completion times of between 15 and 60 minutes are allotted to each block, depending on how many parcels the postie has and the amount of letters and junk mail to deliver.

Once the postie starts the beat and scans the first parcel for delivery, the order and allotted times can't be changed and the worker is not allowed to deviate from the sequence, including for breaks.

Ostensibly, the purpose of this is to provide customers with an accurate estimated delivery time, to more effectively compete with dedicated courier companies as part of AP's shift away from letter mail to the more lucrative parcel delivery business.

It also enables management to closely follow the movement and times of posties throughout the beat, meaning workers may in future face disciplinary action if they are deemed to be delivering too slowly or out of order.

Under the ADM, "streaming" allowed posties to hand off excess parcels to contractors, but this has now been heavily cut back and is only being used for beats without an assigned postie or if the postie is away. Postal workers with a regular assigned beat must now deliver all parcels that come to their beats each day, regardless of number, size, weight, or time required to

deliver them.

Telematic sensors have been fitted to all motorcycles, electric bicycles and Electric Delivery Vehicles (EDVs). This system sends a signal to management if a vehicle is tipped or unusual motion is detected, including hard braking or acceleration. Posties are required to immediately call in to explain any incident that triggers the telematics system into action.

The sensor system, in addition to the video cameras already fitted to EDVs and motorcycles, increases the capacity of management to scrutinise every action of postal workers on their rounds. This monitoring technology was introduced with the full support of the CEPU under the pretext of improving workplace safety.

This is a transparent lie! This has nothing to do with the safety of posties. It is part of an unrelenting drive for increased productivity that is having a profoundly detrimental impact on the health and wellbeing of AP workers. Where is the concern for posties forced to work throughout the COVID-19 pandemic? The true infection rates at AP have been hidden by management and the union. The unsustainable workload and speedups imposed on AP workers have caused increased damage to workers' physical and mental health.

Lessons must be drawn from the establishment of the ADM, when management and the CEPU used the phoney pretext of workplace safety to impose the restructure in April 2020. Feigning concern for the health of postal workers during the pandemic, AP asked for and received regulatory relief from the then Liberal-National government of Scott Morrison to suspend the requirement for everyday letter delivery.

This was carried out with the full cooperation of the CEPU, which signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with management, agreeing to the ADM behind the backs of workers. Over the opposition of posties, the CEPU enforced the MoU's no-strike clause, telling workers they could reverse the decision by placing pressure on AP and the government via the parliamentary system.

The impact of the ADM on postal workers was devastating. Within weeks, posties were forced into delivering two beats on alternate days, doubling their workload, or transitioning to delivering parcels in vans. This led to an increase in injuries and mental health issues as workers were overloaded and

burdened with bundles of mail and parcels they were unable to deliver. As management intended, many posties left AP, unable to continue under the new regime.

The decision by AP management to end the ADM was not, as the CEPU claimed, a victory for workers or a product of the parliamentary hearings the union bureaucracy promoted and participated in. It was a corporate decision made at the highest levels based on the determination that the ADM was not achieving the aims of management and the government to slash costs and prepare AP for privatisation, at least of the lucrative parcel delivery side of the business.

Following his appointment in September 2021, new AP CEO Paul Graham announced an additional \$400 million in capital expenditure over three years, for new and upgraded sorting and delivery facilities, more EDVs and the introduction of new “cloud-based” technology to meet the growing demand in parcel delivery. This restructuring is seen as critical for AP in order to compete with FedEx, Amazon and other package-focussed delivery companies.

Postal workers must recognise that the failure of the ADM does not mean the restructuring of AP is over. The SDM has been developed by management, in close collaboration with the union, to continue this process. The very name “sustainable” implies that changes to the model will be continually introduced to increase the profits of AP.

The demand of AP management for stepped-up output is entirely in line with the wage-cutting agenda of the newly elected federal Labor government. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has made clear that his government is opposed to “across-the-board” growth in real wages and that any pay rises must be tied to increased productivity.

Posties’ safety cannot be left in the hands of management or the union, which have demonstrated throughout the pandemic that they are utterly unconcerned with the health and lives of their employees and members.

Instead, workplace safety and all technological changes associated with it must be placed under the control and supervision of workers themselves.

This means postal workers must fight to build rank-and-file committees, independent of management and the unions, in every AP facility. These committees will provide a democratic forum for posties to monitor and discuss workplace safety issues and develop demands to improve safety as well as pay and other conditions.

In ramming through the 2021 enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) that established the SDM, suppressing calls from sections of AP workers for strikes, the CEPU also committed workers to three years of meagre 3 percent annual wage increases. Only after workers at StarTrack, a separate division of AP covered by the Transport Workers Union, won a Consumer Price Index (CPI) guarantee following two 24-hour strikes, did the CEPU hurriedly negotiate a similar deal for posties, possibly fearing a defection of members.

Even with the CPI guarantee, the union-management pay deal falls far short of what is needed to make up for previous sub-inflationary wage “increases” or keep up with the rapidly rising cost of living.

Workers’ pay will still only be increased once a year, based on the previous quarterly CPI figures, meaning wages will lag behind inflation by 3-15 months. Furthermore, prices for essential goods and services, including fuel, food, utilities and rent are increasing far more rapidly than the CPI. In the year ending March 31, for example, “non-discretionary” costs increased 6.6 percent, while overall inflation was 5.1 percent. Compounding the financial pressure on workers, the Reserve Bank of Australia has just announced its third interest rate hike in as many months to 1.35 percent, up from 0.1 percent at the beginning of May, with further increases expected to follow.

The Postal Workers Rank-and-File Committee urges AP workers to take up a fight for the following demands:

- Immediately increase all pay by 20 percent to compensate for past erosion. Index wages to the current cost of living and introduce an automatic monthly cost of living adjustment to keep pace with rising expenses.
- Give workers full control over workplace safety and monitoring.
- No to further restructuring and the privatisation of AP!
- No to productivity increases!

In order to secure these demands, AP workers should turn to the growing layers of workers entering into struggle against the deepening assault on their wages and conditions. This includes almost 200,000 health, education, public sector and transport workers—in New South Wales alone—who have carried out strikes in recent weeks.

This will require a conscious break with the trade unions, whose role is to isolate and suppress workers, and the fight to build rank-and-file committees at AP and in every section of the working class.

The fight for these demands 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.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact