

Australian Apple retail workers to strike over proposed wage-cutting agreement

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Around 150 Apple retail employees will stop work for one hour on Tuesday as part of a dispute over a new enterprise agreement that will slash real wages. Following the strike, workers will carry out a set of limited work bans for an indefinite period.

While workers across Australia will take part in the industrial action, the main impact will be at two stores in Brisbane and one in Newcastle, where the Retail and Fast Food Workers' Union (RAFFWU) has the greatest coverage over Apple workers.

Most of the company's almost 4,000 Australian employees will not take part in the stoppages or bans, although they are covered by the same agreement, as the Australian Services Union (ASU) and Shop Distributive and Allied Employees Association (SDA) have refused to call for industrial action.

In addition, many workers are prohibited from striking as they are not members of any of the three unions—35 non-union bargaining representatives are involved in the negotiations. Under Australia's harsh industrial relations laws, only workers who are members of a registered union are allowed to strike.

Apple is offering workers annual pay "increases" of just 2.6 percent, a massive wage cut in real terms. This paltry wage bump will only be given to workers who are currently receiving the minimum rate for their classification, which has been frozen since the last enterprise agreement expired in 2018. According to the ASU, this means 75 percent of Apple retail employees will get nothing at all.

Apple is also seeking to retain conditions in the existing agreement which enable the company to roster any employee on any shift, seven days a week, with no set days of work from one two-week roster period to the next.

Part-time employees currently have no guaranteed

minimum hours, meaning they are effectively treated as casuals by the company, but do not receive the 25 percent casual wage loading required by Australian workplace law. The proposed agreement will provide a minimum of 19 hours work per week for part-timers, but will still require them to be available to work at any time.

Under the proposed agreement, workers will not receive evening penalty rates until 8 p.m. While this is a marginal improvement on the previous agreement, in which ordinary hours extend to 10 p.m., workers will still be starved of an hour worth of wages compared to the national retail award, which calls for time-and-a-half from 6 p.m.

The proposed agreement also falls short of provisions in the award that guarantee those who regularly work Saturday and Sunday, one weekend off every four weeks, and consecutive rostered days off work. The RAFFWU has also warned that the deal could allow workers to be rostered for up to 60 hours in a week without overtime.

These conditions expose the company's claims that wages at Apple are 17 percent higher than the industry standard.

The ASU is demanding annual pay increases of CPI plus 2.5 percent, and increases to evening penalty rates that still fall short of the retail award. The RAFFWU is seeking an immediate increase in the minimum base pay rate to \$31 per hour and annual pay increases of 5 percent or CPI plus 2.5 percent, whichever is higher.

While the RAFFWU has put forward a lengthy log of claims, its recent deal with bookstore chain Readings makes clear that the union is prepared to grant major concessions to employers. That agreement, which the union described as "one of the best retail agreements in Australia," included penalty rates lower than the award.

Previous enterprise agreements at Apple were essentially negotiated between different sections of management. The “employee representative” who signed off on the 2014 agreement was the general manager of the company’s main Australian store in George St, Sydney.

In an attempt to avoid industrial action over the new agreement, the company has tried to ram through the deal before the unions could present a log of claims or organise a strike ballot.

In August, the unions claim, Apple issued workers with a draft agreement, but did not notify the unions that the bargaining period had started.

On September 19, Apple again tried to bypass the unions, sending the “final” proposed agreement directly to workers and informing them a vote would be held in seven days.

This was rushed through in a deliberate ploy to prevent workers from striking. A protected action ballot called by the RAFFWU was set to close on September 26, after which a minimum of three days’ notice of any industrial action would have to be provided to Apple.

A lawyer for the company told the Fair Work Commission on September 20: “any change in timetable... raises the very real risk of being exposed to protected industrial action on or after the 30th of that month.”

After the unions applied to the Fair Work Commission (FWC) to stop the vote, the company agreed to further negotiations. The RAFFWU has told Apple its members will walk off the job for 24 hours if the company calls another vote on an agreement that the union has not endorsed.

The primary purpose of the RAFFWU industrial action and the legal challenges issued by the three unions is to guarantee the bureaucracies a “seat at the table” in backroom negotiations with the company.

The three unions are highlighting the dire conditions at Apple, not out of any genuine concern for the interests of workers, but in a bid to build their membership at the well-known corporation, where their coverage has been limited since the company opened its first Australian store in 2008.

The SDA is notorious for working hand-in-glove with major retailers and fast-food chains to slash wages and conditions for some of the lowest-paid workers in the country.

The RAFFWU postures as an alternative to the SDA and was formed in 2016 in response to widespread anger over revelations of SDA deals that had allowed hundreds of thousands of workers to be paid less than legal minimums.

Despite the RAFFWU’s self-proclaimed outsider status, its founder and secretary, Josh Cullinan, is a career union bureaucrat, having previously held full-time posts in the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU).

The RAFFWU positions itself as a pole of attraction for workers angered by the continuing assault on their pay and conditions and frustrated by decades of betrayal by the SDA and other unions. It promotes the conception that workers can secure decent wages and conditions simply by joining a more “militant” union.

No less than the SDA and the other unions, the RAFFWU defends the whole framework of enterprise bargaining and the pro-business industrial courts that has been used over the past forty years to slash workers’ pay and conditions and suppress the class struggle.

The aim of the RAFFWU is to shore up this apparatus with some militant verbiage, and to prevent workers from making a break with the unions, which are no longer workers’ organisations in any sense of the term. Its rhetoric is directed against the formation of independent rank-and-file committees, directly controlled and democratically run by workers themselves.

RAFFWU, like every other union, defends the capitalist system, under which the economy and society as a whole are dominated by massive corporations such as Apple, which is valued at more than \$US2 trillion.



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