

Australia Post workers speak out against union-enforced COVID-19 dangers and cuts to conditions

By Jim Franklin and Oscar Grenfell
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Three Australia Post (AP) workers spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* this week about the COVID-19 dangers they have been subjected to by unions and management at the state-owned postal service, and the escalating attacks on their conditions during the pandemic.

Under draconian regulations, previously upheld by the courts, public sector employees can be sacked, and face other punitive repercussions, for speaking about their conditions of work. For this reason, the AP workers are compelled to make their comments anonymously.

Despite the threats, which have never been challenged by the unions, the workers said they felt they must speak out because of the destructive consequences of yet another pro-business overhaul at AP initiated this year, as well as the dangerous conditions they have faced.

On the pretext of the pandemic, AP management and the federal government scrapped daily letter delivery requirements and moved to an “Alternative Delivery Model” (ADM). This is aimed at refocusing the entity’s operations into the lucrative parcel sector, in preparation for privatisation, including through mass job cuts.

When the changes were announced in April, officials from the Communication Electrical and Plumbers Union (CEPU) and Communications Workers Union (CWU), which cover AP, feigned shock and warned that at least 2,000 jobs were threatened. It rapidly emerged that they had been in back-room talks with the government before the overhaul was introduced.

Since then the unions have sought to prevent any opposition from workers. They have signed up to the introduction of the ADM, on the basis of a worthless pledge from management that there will be no enforced job cuts over the next 12 months, and are imposing a ban on any industrial action.

The three workers all said that the COVID-19 crisis was only a pretext for the overhaul. Indeed they and their colleagues had been imperilled by the virus, as a result of the actions of management and the unions.

Over the coming days, the WSWs will publish further comments from the workers.

Asked about information during the pandemic, one of the

workers said: “We were told very little at the start of the pandemic. I saw in an interview where AP CEO Christine Holgate recently said 50 employees had contracted the virus this year. But we were never told on the shop floor what was going on. We ran out of hand sanitiser at one point and it took several weeks before they sourced and provided more. Most posties brought their own sanitiser and face masks.

“Meanwhile we were doing our rounds as normal. We were told we had to continue to deliver junk mail even though this meant spending more time outside under conditions of a growing world-wide pandemic. The response by management when it was questioned was because it’s a revenue source. So, it was perfectly clear from the start that revenue was and is more important than the wellbeing and safety of workers.

“For its part, the union simply agreed with the policies that management instigated. Management introduced social distancing in the facilities and split the start times for teams, with one set starting at 6.30 a.m., and the other at 8.30 a.m., which then changed to 9 a.m. When we asked why we were starting later, the reply was to cut overtime. It had very little to do with combating COVID-19 and everything to do with saving costs.

“The unions just repeated what management said and told us that if a case of COVID emerged in our facility, then we should take our safety into our own hands and not go in. But they never put forward any united action independently of management. Workers were left to decide for themselves.”

Another worker said: “The information from the union is very limited. An example of their role was demonstrated at the beginning of the pandemic. There was a case at a facility and workers were not told about it before they clocked on. So when the second shift came in they went to work as usual. The personal protective equipment (PPE) is limited and social distancing is almost non-existent because staff have to congregate to do their work like getting late express parcels.”

The third worker noted that there had been a major overhaul at their facility in the months preceding the pandemic, involving the installation of large sorting machines.

So the staff “were squeezed in like battery hens at work

stations and mail/parcel slotting spaces were greatly diminished. Every square meter of our vast facility was calculated and re-calculated to save as much space as possible. So when COVID hit we were already up against each other. Shifts were created and starting times staggered but whenever production needs warranted, posties were sorting mail shoulder to shoulder and no-one blinked.”

The worker added, “Whatever COVID cases emerged it was reported in whispered terms under the guise of privacy of the individual, which automatically vetoed the collective health and knowledge of the rest of us.

“We used to have daily reports of COVID hot spots in Sydney. We were told that we had to automatically go home and isolate if we had been to any of these places. Reporting of this stopped a month ago for my team. Of course many of us were worried because we were natural carriers and distributors of COVID given our very job was to be in daily contact with a wide variety of people and places.

“There is no doubt in my mind that many middle managers, being ex-posties themselves, did the best they could to keep social distancing and provide PPE, but the demands of production are a hard weight to carry and enforce and the balancing act always falls the way of keeping your job and that means delivering what production demands. The union doesn’t even warrant a mention in all this.”

The workers all noted that in addition to the safety dangers, the introduction of the ADM, enforced by the unions, had made their job far more onerous than before.

One of them explained: “The ADM is based on seniority. Those with the longest time up get assigned a beat or a van run and then those left over are the ones whose positions would have become redundant under the initial management proposal. They are now known as ‘floaters.’ At this point management has decided to keep these workers and they are given whatever jobs are available. You could be doing a beat or delivering parcels or whatever is needed. I heard you could even be asked to go to another facility if the work is there.

“If you refuse then there is no position for you and you don’t have a job. We heard of some posties that have been doing a beat for years or riding a motorbike, being told they have to change. When they said they didn’t want to, they were told to do as they were instructed, or they wouldn’t have a job anymore.

“The ADM changes the way we work. As a walking postie you will have to start delivering two beats instead of one. You have to do them on alternative days. But this now means you get double the mail and large letters and magazines including junk mail. Posties are doing double the amount of work each day on a beat as well as delivering parcels, which we were already doing. If you are a delivery van postie with parcels, you are like a gig economy worker. It’s basically courier work.”

Another said that the ADM had only recently been rolled out at their facility: “I witnessed one normally calm and cheerful

postie have a meltdown of confusion and panic on their first day in a van. What used to be a job you would gladly retire on has now become like a job for contractors forever chasing their tail to meet deadlines with piecemeal payments. We still get paid hourly but under enormous pressure to perform.

“The main response I have seen is man overboard. In anticipation of the destruction of a good job and now realising fully that the union will do nothing, many are walking the plank. Some know they are jumping into a sea of sharks of economic uncertainty, but still we are now having a weekly parade. I know of at least ten in the last fortnight who have or are about to go. Many posties within an earshot of retirement are seriously considering doing so rather than having to practically learn a new job.

“Whilst management are saying where you work and what you do is optional, it is clear to me from a number of cases they are having a quiet word to posties that they have already worked out a ‘preferred option’ that best suits the ADM.”

The third worker said: “Posties with little seniority, especially with young families, don’t want to go into vans but they have to do it because there is no other position. They don’t want to do it because the amount of parcels and difficulty of delivery means you finish late. It is also hard to find legal parking, so for a number of the van drivers they are walking more than when they were just regular posties. They have to power walk to deliver, often going up many flights of stairs every day.

“Posties are very upset because they are very tired when they get home and can’t do much with their families. Their legs are so sore that they have to have a hot bath and soak their legs to help recover. By the end of the week they can be very fatigued.”

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