

Australia Post workers denounce union-enforced restructure, call for independent rank-and-file committees

By Jim Franklin and Oscar Grenfell
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In comments to the *World Socialist Web Site* this week, three Australia Post (AP) workers have condemned a union-enforced overhaul of work practices as an attack on their conditions, and have called on their colleagues to form rank-and-file committees to launch an industrial and political struggle against the corporate offensive.

An article posted on the WSWs yesterday featured statements from the three workers, revealing the role of management and the unions in imperilling them with the danger of coronavirus infection throughout the pandemic. The AP staff outlined the dire consequences of an “Alternative Delivery Model” that has recently been introduced, which is already resulting in vastly increased workloads and paves the way for mass sackings.

The workers also spoke out against the claims of the Communication Electrical and Plumbers Union (CEPU) and the Communications Workers Union (CWU), which cover AP, that the overhaul at the state-owned postal service will be time limited. Both unions have agreed to enforce the changes, including a shift away from letter-delivery into the lucrative parcel sector, and have signed a 12-month no-strike pledge, on the pretext of a worthless pledge from management that there will be no enforced job cuts over the next year.

One of the workers explained that the restructure had nothing to do with protecting workers’ safety and jobs during the pandemic.

He said that “COVID was the black swan moment that fully opened pre-existing cracks. It just accelerated the process towards privatisation. The collapse of mail volume; the substantial increase in internet parcel purchases; the decline in store shopping in favour of overseas purchases; the flipping of paper mail bills and information to email, none of this was new.

“Now, however, management and the unions can claim ‘you’re lucky to even have jobs,’ and it rings more true before this year’s events. Fear of economic destitution has become a thing. The collapse of at least the Australian stock market weighs heavily on superannuation for those close to retirement who have seen their ‘nest egg’ cut by 30 percent in a few

months. When we were told this was the biggest crisis in decades for AP, and they announced their plans for the future it was clear such well thought out plans and charts weren’t developed in a few weeks. This was a Drawer D nuclear option they had been working on for many years with experts in charge and now amateurs have to enforce it.”

His comments were echoed by another of the workers, who stated: “It is clear that they are trying to prepare AP for future privatisation. It reminds me of what they did to UK Royal; the way they did it there and the impact it has had on workers there. It is a similar thing they are now doing to the USP in America. The outcome is a callous indifference to the health, safety and livelihoods of workers world-wide as they seek to make the largest returns possible, even if it means workers catching COVID-19 and dying, or being pauperised.”

The worker noted that the initial management plan had involved the destruction of one in four postal positions. That had been “put on ice,” but only for the time being, and only because management and the unions “fear mass hostility from the workforce.”

AP, he said, was pursuing a different strategy, with the same goal and the same consequences for workers. He said it was clear the management have a “figure of job cuts they are aiming for, and if they can’t get it through ‘natural attrition’ then they will start mass sackings at the end of the 12-month period.”

Whatever the exact tempo: “These changes are permanent. There is no going back from this. They have made it clear this is the new normal, so get used to it or get out. I have seen a lot of restructuring in many industries over the years and they never go back.”

The worker denounced the unions for playing the central role in the restructure: “They never told us that they were going to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with management. They would say in online meetings they were in discussions with management, but not that they had this MOU. They never presented it to union members, we never got to debate it or demand changes, we never voted on it and then they handed it to us once it was a done deal. The excuse they used was they

had to sign it to protect our conditions. But that is just false. Our conditions are under attack right now through this restructuring. They have signed a deal that allows management to go ahead with the restructuring.

“I think the no-strike agreement is to make sure we don’t take any independent action in what could become explosive conditions where postal workers oppose the restructuring. What else do workers have but the right to withhold our labour to fight the company’s attacks? The union knows this and as far as I can tell the no strike clause means an orderly restructuring where workers can complain, but in the end can’t do a damn thing to stop it. This is not new. It is how the unions always tie workers’ hands to stop them fighting back.”

The other worker agreed: “On the eve of the biggest battle of our lives, the union has gone around in the middle of the night and emptied our guns of bullets. Just as the war begins they take away our right to withdraw our labour and push us into the trenches with our hands tied behind our backs.

“It’s like police and criminals. You think they are polar opposites, but in their everyday lives they rub shoulder to shoulder till all lines are blurred. The union prides itself on being the responsible civil adult in the room, especially when the legitimate anger of the workers becomes explosive. The CEPU sells itself on being able to faithfully deliver a contract and outcome suitable for management. That is their real role, whatever loud rhetoric they spin in the speeches they make in front of us.”

For years, the unions had prevented any democratic discussion among AP staff. The worker explained that “Up until this year every meeting the union officials have held onsite, and there have only been a few, have been around new contract negotiations. Every one of these meetings have been attended by management. Every one has been on company time and every one has allowed management to see exactly who disagrees and who asks questions and who are the militants.

“Given that all managers used to be posties, many are still union members, and so they anonymously join the Zoom union meetings and know exactly who the ‘trouble makers’ are.”

The third worker placed the pro-business role of the CEPU and the CWU in a broader context: “The unions are heavily involved in these processes, and in the end they help to advise management on the best way to implement the changes they want. The fact that Greg Rayner, the president of the CWU, is now a member of AP’s leadership council for safety shows what the unions have been doing for more than 30 years now.

“Look at Sally McManus, secretary of the Australian Council of Trade Unions. She has been working with the Liberal government every day. The Liberal minister Christian Porter even said that she is now his ‘best friend forever.’ They are hatching a new Accord like the ones under the Hawke and Keating Labor governments in the 80s, which decimated the conditions and jobs of workers. It’s why there is so much casualisation of the workforce. What they are doing at AP is

what the employers and the unions want to do everywhere.”

All three workers rejected the unions’ calls for them to appeal to Labor, the Greens and the parliament to prevent a permanent restructure. One of them said: “It’s easy for Labor parliamentarians like Anthony Albanese, Ed Husic, Jenny McAllister and Michelle Rowland to get up and make noise about Australia Post, but if the ALP [Australian Labor Party] was in power they wouldn’t do anything differently. They closed down major government employers like Cockatoo Island and restructured many, many industries that led to the destruction of full time jobs, workers conditions’ and the casualisation of the workforce.”

They insisted that the only way forward is for AP workers to form completely independent rank-and-file committees to carry out a political and industrial fight against AP management, the unions and the government.

“I believe that there is no leadership for workers,” one of them said. “We either build new organizations with a different perspective otherwise we will have no future. Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again expecting different results. We would be insane at this late stage in the game to believe we will not be sold out again. Any independent political movement by posties would first and foremost be opposed by the unions and Labor. Their very existence depends upon us believing the nooses they are putting around our necks are victory medals.”

Another said: “Any defence of jobs, wages and working conditions by the working class needs to be done in a fight against the unions. I think a rank-and-file-committee is essential for the working class to be able to fight back.”

The third declared: “Workers in other countries confront the same and worse, like we see in the US and the UK. Our situation is the same everywhere. All the unions do is tell us we can’t organise outside and tie our hands so we can’t fight back, while they are busy hatching rotten deals and useless campaigns that in the end only help the employers get everything they want.

“Workers are seeking a new way to fight and would support the building of rank-and-file committees to unite their struggles and organise themselves. I think such organisations will need to educate workers about the lessons we have been through, especially the role of the unions, so we don’t make the same mistakes.”

We appeal to AP workers who want to fight the restructure and the dangerous conditions to contact the Socialist Equality Party at: sep@sep.org.au

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>