



CWU notifies dispute over Optus pay rates

Thursday March 2, 2016

The CWU has now notified a dispute with the Fair Work Commission over pay rates and training for employees working on its Single Service Desk.

As reported in E-bulletin #1, these employees have been performing a wider range of functions since Optus rationalised its Help Desk operations into a single contact point last year.



The reorganisation has also meant that some employees are now dealing with more complex service resolution issues and procedures – but without extra training or extra pay.

The notification of a formal dispute follows a number of meetings between the CWU and Optus which failed to resolve these issues.

Members will be kept informed about progress in this case.

ACMA: enterprise bargaining resumes

Negotiations for a new enterprise agreement (EA) in the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) are scheduled to recommence this week.

Late last year, ACMA staff rejected a proposed agreement, the second time they have done so despite now having gone without a pay rise for three years.



Once again, the vote was decisive. Turn-out was high, with 87.38% of people eligible to vote doing so. Of these, 61.76% voted NO.

These are strong results and reflect employees' strong opposition to the federal government's policies of requiring Commonwealth employees to trade off hard-won conditions for a meagre pay rise with no back pay.

The vote also reflects an effective stalemate in negotiations. The fact is that the federal government's position makes negotiations almost impossible because the key element of any such bargaining – the wage rise – is non-negotiable.

ACMA: enterprise bargaining resumes (cont)

Bargaining for this new EA began in September 2014 – 2 ½ years ago. The only obstacle to reaching agreement is the Turnbull government. There could be no clearer indication of how ruthlessly this government is trying to reduce working people's wages and conditions – and how determined workers are to resist them.

Silcar Communications EA negotiations

E-bulletin #1 reported on the state of play in negotiations between the CWU and Silcar Communications (now part of Visionstream) for a new Enterprise Agreement (EA).



Discussions last year failed to achieve any final agreement on proposed changes to employee conditions designed to bring them more into line with those in another Visionstream agreement which covers similar work.

To date employees have not been willing to accept these changes, despite not having had a pay rise since July 2015.

The CWU and other bargaining representatives will now meet with Silcar Communications on Thursday

March 2 in an attempt to resolve outstanding issues.

Safety Alert: Telstra exchanges

The CWU has been made aware of a safety incident that occurred in a Telstra exchange in NSW earlier this year.

The incident involved a field worker who encountered an electrical hazard while replacing a fluorescent tube. According to Telstra's account of the incident, the worker disconnected the power lead from the daisy chain to commence the task. The disconnected light power cable drooped down and made contact with the metal cage that surrounds the light fitting, causing a short circuit and a subsequent tripping of the circuit breaker.

An investigation revealed that the hazard arose from changes to the exchange suite lighting that had been made incorrectly, so that an extension cord in use had two male plugs (one at each end) and remained active despite one end being disconnected.



Members are reminded of the following:

- The maintenance of a safe workplace is the responsibility of the employer. This includes ensuring that those carrying out maintenance work, however routine, are appropriately trained and qualified to do so.
- No workplace task should be undertaken unless you are satisfied it is safe to do so. You have a right to refuse to perform work which you consider hazardous or for which you are not appropriately trained.
- Modifications to and/or repair of electrical equipment in exchanges should only be carried out by a qualified electrician.

A “disastrous decision”: FWC cuts penalty rates

Unions have slammed a Fair Work Commission (FWC) decision that will see workers in some industries lose up to \$6,000 a year in lost penalty rates.

And they have called on all political parties to take steps to ensure that the decision doesn't cut workers' total take-home pay.

In a major ruling released on Thursday 23 February, the FWC reduced Sunday penalty rates in the hospitality, retail, fast food and pharmacy sectors and pared-back public holiday penalties in five awards.



Full-time and part-time workers in retail will have their Sunday penalty rates dropped from 200 per cent to 150 per cent of their standard hourly rate, while casuals will go from 200 per cent to 175 per cent.

Hospitality employees will face a reduction in Sunday pay from 175 per cent to 150 per cent, while casual hospitality workers' pay will remain unchanged.

Many of the workers affected are already among the lowest paid in the country.

Labor leader, Bill Shorten, said the decision was “disastrous” while Greens MP Adam Bandt said the cuts were a “body blow” to people who relied on penalty rates to make ends meet.

Both parties have pledged to find ways of legislating to ensure that workers are not left worse off by the FWC move, though to date there is no agreement on just how this might be achieved.

The decision will not directly affect most CWU members although it has a potential impact on employees of Telstra Retail whose conditions are underpinned by the Retail Industry Award rather than the Telstra Award. At present, however, those conditions are protected by the current Telstra Enterprise Agreement.

Of course the decision, if it stands, will set a precedent that will undermine all penalty rates over time. That is why the CWU, along with other unions, will be supporting all efforts to either overturn this decision or offset its effects.

NBN HFC roll-out “a mess” says TPG

Getting customers connected to the HFC sections of the NBN is proving to be a slow and difficult process, says Australia's No.2 fixed broadband provider, TPG.

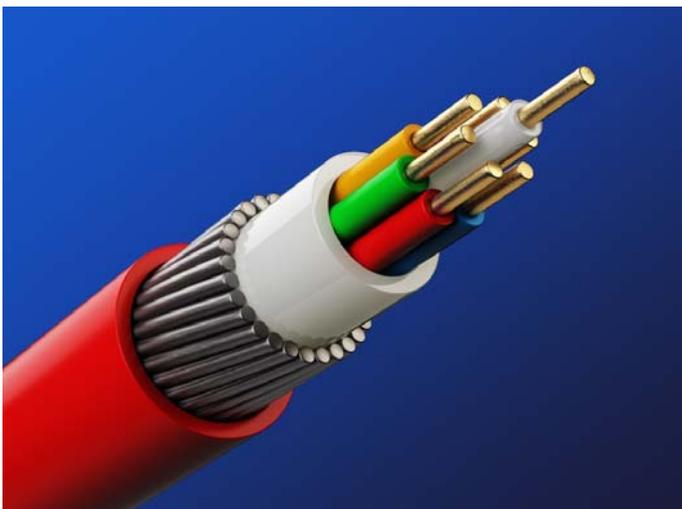
According to a TPG spokesperson, it has been taking on average 19 days to get an HFC connection to a building, with delays affecting Victorian customers in particular. There have also major delays in getting connection problems fixed, he said.

“It's a mess. Quite frankly it's appalling.”

NBN CEO Bill Morrow has acknowledged that the HFC roll-out will encounter technical hurdles but argues that initial “rough patches” are to be expected as each new platform is developed.

It would seem though that the problem is not only one of technology. TPG has pointed to skill shortages as a major contributor to the delays and service difficulties.

Lend Lease: negotiations continue (cont)



This is hardly surprising. HFC skills have been in relatively short supply for some years and while nbn itself has recently taken steps to put relevant training programmes in place, the development of this section of the project's workforce was always likely to lag behind demand, especially given nbn's ambitious targets.

nbn is looking to have nearly 900,000 premises Ready for Service via the HFC platform by the end of June this year. At the end of December 2016, the number stood at a bit under 160,000.

The dangers here are obvious and include both "quick and dirty" training and an increased reliance on short-term visa workers to fill skill gaps.

Neither option will meet the longer-term needs of the local industry and its customers for a stable, technically literate and highly competent communications workforce.

Source: Communications Day.

Carriers call for NBN write-down

As the NBN roll-out gathers pace and more premises are cut over onto the new network, Retail Service Providers (RSPs) are starting to feel the pinch.

The reason? The difference between what they have had to pay in the past to use Telstra's copper network and the charges being levied by nbn in its attempt to ensure that the mega-billion dollar project makes a commercial return.

As retail margins are squeezed, RSP's share prices are being hit, as was TPG's last year and Telstra's last week.

Meanwhile, RSPs say, end-customers' appetite for truly high speed broadband is being dampened by the high prices they have to pay for superfast nbn-based services.

The answer? According to the Competitive Carriers Coalition (CCC), a group of second-tier telcos, the government needs to accept a write-down of part of its "wasted investment" in the NBN so that the company can restructure its prices and spur sales growth.



The CCC's recent call for a write-down is not its first and undoubtedly will not be its last. The pressures on RSPs can only mount as an ever-increasing portion of their customers are herded onto the NBN.

Larger players will be able to offset the margin squeeze to some degree through economies of scale, especially now that nbn has restructured its prices to allow volume discounts. Telstra – and to a lesser degree Optus – will also be cushioned by the payments they receive to shut down their own networks.

But smaller RSPs are facing extinction – a perverse outcome of a policy that was meant to spur

Carriers call for NBN write-down (cont)

competition.

Whether or not any federal government would consider a write-down of this highly contentious and politicised national infrastructure, at least before the forecast NBN completion date of 2020, is another question.

RSPs probably shouldn't hold their breath.

International Women's Day: 8 March

On Wednesday 8 March millions of women around the world will mark International Women's Day with rallies, marches and celebrations.

For union members, whether men or women, it is worth remembering that this day was originally known as International Working Women's Day – and for good reason. It had its beginnings in the struggles for decent rights and conditions for women workers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly in the US and Europe.

On 8 March, 1908, 15,000 women garment workers, including many immigrants, marched through New York City to demand economic and political rights. The action spurred a three month strike by immigrant garment workers which targeted notorious New York sweatshops, including Triangle Shirtwaist, the scene of a horrific fire a few years later in which 146 women workers were killed.



The example of the US women workers, together with the growing involvement of women in labour movement struggles in Europe during this period, led in 1910 to the call for a special day to mark working women's solidarity internationally.

The following year, women in Europe took to the streets on the first official IWD to demand their rights as workers and as citizens.

Today, many people who celebrate IWD may not be aware of its history and the importance of keeping that history alive.

The fact is, though, that globally women continue to be among the most ruthlessly exploited and most vulnerable workers as the terrible events in Bangladesh a few years ago reminded the world. The collapse of the Rana Plaza building in 2013 resulted in the death of 1,134 garment workers and the injury of over 2,400 more. The vast majority of these – around 80% - were women.

And while tragedies such as this are now rare in “first world” countries like Australia, women here still earn on average some 20% less than men – a “gender pay gap” that largely reflects the relatively low value placed on so-called “women's work” such as administrative and human services.

Today, some 60% of Australian women are in the workforce and they make up 46% of the total number of

International Women's Day: 8 March

workers. These figures point to the obvious fact that there can be no Women's Day which isn't also a Working Women's Day and that so-called "women's issues", whether they be wage equity, promotional opportunity, childcare availability or domestic violence, are the business of the entire labour movement.

The CWU encourages members to check out IWD activities in their state – and join in.

Keep in touch

Keep in touch

Members' comments and contributions are encouraged.

If you require any further information on any of the articles contained in this bulletin, please contact your state branch or email cwu@cwu.org.au

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If you have any questions on any of the above articles, please contact an official at the Union office on (08) 8443 7389.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'G Lorrain'.

Graham Lorrain
Branch President
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