

Australia: Betrayal of workers at Pampas is nothing new for the United Workers Union

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Through a campaign of isolation and financial deprivation, the United Workers Union (UWU) has forced through a sell-out enterprise agreement that will slash real wages for workers at the Pampas pastry and bread factory in Melbourne.

The operation was capped off with a thoroughly anti-democratic ballot process, in which votes were counted by representatives of management and the union bureaucracy who were in complete agreement and jointly working to impose the deal. Even so, the official results—50 “yes” and 14 “no”—reflected substantial opposition among workers.

The hostility among workers to the agreement and the UWU leadership is far more widespread than the ballot indicates, however. Many of those who voted “yes” did so because they could not afford to stop work again with the woefully inadequate “strike pay” offered by the UWU, and because they recognised that there was no way to advance their struggle within the union framework. Dozens of labour-hire casual workers were not permitted to vote and some workers abstained, meaning a sizeable percentage of the workforce did not vote in favour of the agreement.

The end of the strike and the wage-cutting agreement foisted onto the workers following their determined four-week strike were not the result of any unwillingness to fight on the part of Pampas workers. They fought with their hands tied because the UWU apparatus did nothing to broaden support for the strike, did not stop production in the plant or supplies going in and out, and did not provide adequate strike pay for workers to sustain a prolonged strike. This completely undermined the ability of workers to continue the fight.

Nothing is resolved and the struggle is by no means over. But the lessons of the betrayal of Pampas workers’ struggle at the hands of the UWU apparatus need to be worked through, as their experience is not isolated to a single factory or company.

The fact that this experience has been repeated over and over requires serious conclusions to be drawn about who is the friend of the workers and who is not.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) fought throughout this struggle to inform workers in other Goodman Fielder factories and more broadly about the strike, which the union leaders had kept hidden. As in previous struggles where the UWU carried out an isolation operation, the SEP reached out to health workers, teachers, postal workers and others to support the Pampas staff. Why? Because all workers face the same wage cuts, super-exploitative workloads and increasingly casual nature of work.

With the UWU in charge, none of those elements necessary for the victory of the strike is possible. What is required is the formation of an independent rank-and-file committee, democratically controlled by workers themselves not highly-paid union officials.

Central to the establishment of such committees is reviewing and learning the lessons of the UWU bureaucracy’s betrayals, not only at Pampas but in a string of other significant recent disputes.

Smeaton Grange

In 2020–2021, 350 warehouse workers in the southwest Sydney suburb

of Smeaton Grange were locked out by Coles, the major supermarket chain, after they began industrial action demanding a 5.5 percent per annum pay rise, increased redundancy pay and guaranteed redeployment when the slated closure of the facility happened.

From the outset, the UWU insisted there was nothing workers could do to prevent the warehouse being shut down within several years and most jobs destroyed. The bureaucracy’s early posture of fighting for a “just transition” and “fair redundancies” was abandoned, as was the 5.5 percent pay claim.

The lockout was prepared well in advance by Coles. Stock and equipment were transferred to other facilities and “pop-up” distribution centres to ensure the impact of the shutdown on company operations and profits was negligible.

The UWU leadership made no attempt to appeal to workers in the other warehouses, or labour-hire casuals transferred from Smeaton Grange, to refuse to effectively cross the picket by taking on the extra stock.

While the union covers workers in dozens of other Coles and (supermarket rival) Woolworths distribution centres around the country—several of which were also slated to close—most were not even informed that the lockout was taking place.

The Smeaton Grange workers were hung out to dry by the union bureaucracy, isolated not just from other Coles workers but from the rest of the UWU’s 150,000 members and the broader working class. The union, which has \$300 million in assets and \$94 million in cash reserves, provided no strike pay for the entire 14-week period of the lockout, forcing many workers to find other jobs as the lockout wore on.

Despite the deliberate efforts of the UWU leadership to shatter workers’ resolve, they held out for the more than three months and were forced to vote at least ten times on company offers that were virtually unchanged from those they had previously rejected.

The SEP exposed the UWU’s refusal to provide strike pay and warned workers that the bureaucracy was preparing a sell-out. In order to prevent this, the SEP urged workers to take matters into their own hands and form a rank-and-file committee to reach out to broad layers of the working class, including other workers at Coles and Woolworths, to begin a unified fight for decent wages and against the closure of the facility.

On January 21, 2021, the union declared the dispute over, based on a dubious “indicative” ballot in which more than 100 votes were discarded as “duplicates.” When workers rejected the deal in an official ballot on February 2, the UWU bureaucracy confronted a crisis.

Concerned that the UWU was losing control of the dispute, Coles Chief Operations Officer Matt Swindells intervened with a video statement, denouncing workers encouraging their colleagues to vote “no” as “extremely irresponsible.” Swindells’ concern was that this disrupted a union-management “return to work plan.”

Further expressing the close relationship between Coles and the UWU, Swindells attacked Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaigners as “faceless people, who are not even part of the union.”

Expressing the class relations with extraordinary frankness, the union and management on one side, workers and the SEP on the other, Swindells declared: “The only people who have an alternative plan are the extreme socialists who have infiltrated this dispute ... suggesting this wider agenda of taking on big business and the banks.”

Under immense financial pressure, facing the prospect of further weeks and months without work, and seeing no way to take their struggle forward with a union leadership that was clearly working against them, the workers begrudgingly accepted the deal on February 27.

The agreement did nothing to resolve workers’ issues, falling far short of workers’ demands for guaranteed jobs when the factory closed and a higher cap on redundancy pay. The annual pay “rise” of 3.5 percent was woefully inadequate to offset the rising cost of living.

McCormick Foods

On February 26, 2021, almost 100 workers at the McCormick Foods factory in the Melbourne suburb of Clayton began an indefinite strike. After a five-year pay freeze, the UWU advanced a demand for a meagre 3 percent annual increase.

The UWU bureaucracy provided no strike pay, and kept the dispute completely cut off from the broader working class, including workers at a nearby warehouse also owned by McCormick.

After six weeks, the UWU declared victory, making no mention of the inclusion in the enterprise agreement of a new night shift, enabling the company to operate around the clock without incurring overtime penalty rates.

General Mills

Then in early June 2021, around 80 workers at the General Mills food manufacturing factory in Western Sydney began an indefinite strike.

Production continued at the factory throughout the strike, as a result of successive union-brokered agreements to allow unfettered use of labour-hire casuals, with no legal right to join the strike. The UWU, responsible for the situation faced by the casuals, then denounced them as “scabs” and made no attempt to appeal to them.

This division and isolation was extended beyond the factory gates with the bureaucracy doing nothing to mobilise support from other food production workers or the broader working class.

Determined to avoid a repeat of Smeaton Grange, where its stranglehold on workers was severely strained, the UWU bureaucracy flooded the Rooty Hill site with union organisers from the outset. Their chief task was to prevent any discussion of an independent perspective for workers and a unified struggle based on a socialist program.

This was carried out in brutish fashion, snatching *World Socialist Web Site* articles away from workers, and threatening physical violence against Socialist Equality Party members who attempted to speak with workers.

Again, workers were provided with no strike pay by the union, placing the already low-earning workers under immense pressure. The strike was brought to an abrupt end after three weeks, with the UWU bureaucracy declaring “victory” on the basis of sub-inflationary annual pay-rises of 3 percent in the first year, then 2.75 percent and 2.5 percent in the following years, less than the meagre 3 percent claim advanced by the union during the strike.

In stark contrast with the hostile response to socialist campaigners, the UWU welcomed Labor parliamentarians and senior union apparatchiks with open arms, just as it had done at Smeaton Grange and elsewhere.

One of these was Tony Burke, then shadow Minister for Workplace Relations, who was playing a leading role in Labor’s pitch to big business ahead of the 2022 federal election. Burke had already outlined initial plans to increase the powers of the Fair Work Commission, since realised with new anti-strike laws introduced late last year.

The new legislation builds upon the already harsh industrial relations laws imposed by successive Labor governments, beginning in 1983 under Bob Hawke and Paul Keating.

The promotion of Labor by the UWU and other unions reflects the fact that the bureaucracies are completely on board with its agenda of imposing the full cost of the escalating economic crisis upon the working class through cuts to wages and social spending.

The consistent *modus operandi* of the UWU illustrates beyond any doubt that these betrayals are not the product of tactical errors or the shortcomings of individual union officials.

None of this is unique to the UWU. The fact that this union has been involved in many of the seminal disputes in recent years stems partly from the fact that it has the largest membership of any union covering industrial workers.

The UWU was formed in 2019 through the amalgamation of the National Union of Workers and United Voice. The merger was partly motivated by the rapidly declining membership of the two unions, which between 2002 and 2019 lost a combined total of 82,000 members (35 percent). It was also directed at creating an organisation capable of more efficiently enforcing the demands of big business and government for ever-deeper attacks on the working class.

Also significant is the UWU’s substantial coverage in “essential” industries, like food production and distribution. Employees in this sector have been forced to work throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, risking their health and lives every day while their employers racked up record profits. This fits into the broader context of the resurgence of industrial action in Australia, which has centrally featured mass strikes by health workers and teachers, who have been sharply affected by COVID-19 and the “let it rip” policies adopted by all governments.

The UWU bureaucracy, like that of every other union, sells workers out time and time again because that is its role as suppressor-in-chief of working-class struggle.

No longer workers’ organisations in any sense, the unions serve as an industrial police force of governments, big business, to which they are closely tied through large investment portfolios and massive superannuation funds they jointly control with the barons of industry. As a result, the fortunes of the unions are directly linked with driving up corporate profits through deepening attacks on the working class.

This poses the need for workers everywhere to establish rank-and-file committees. These are the only means of establishing a forum for democratic discussion of the issues workers confront and to develop a plan to fight for the independent interests of the working class.

This must be developed on an international basis, through an interconnected network of rank-and-file committees built by the growing number of workers in Australia and around the world who confront similar attacks on jobs, wages and conditions, amid rapid rises in the cost of living.

The struggle for decent wages and conditions is above all a political issue, posing workers with the need to fight all those forces imposing the dictates of the capitalist class—from the corporations, to Labor and the union apparatus.

Such a struggle raises the necessity for an alternative perspective to the pro-capitalist program of the unions who defend the “right” of giant transnational corporations to dominate production and organise it on the basis of profits. That alternative is a socialist program, aimed at placing the major corporations, and banks, under the democratic control of the international working class, and reorganising society to meet the needs of working people, not those of a parasitic oligarchy.



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