

United Workers Union sells out Australian poultry workers' strike after five days

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Late last month, a strike by around 1,000 poultry workers in South Australia (SA) and Western Australia (WA) was shut down by union organisers after just five days. The workers, who earn little more than the minimum wage, were sent back on the job on the basis of a sell-out union-management deal that will further cut real wages.

Workers at Ingham's, Australia's largest poultry and feed processing company, voted overwhelmingly to strike in opposition to the company's offer of nominal wage increases of 3.9 percent in the first year, followed by 3.5 percent in each of the two following years. The company also rejected a demand for casual workers to be offered permanent employment after six months.

Ingham's has operations in every state and in the Northern Territory. The company last month reported that revenue for fiscal 2023 rose 12.2 percent to \$3.04 billion and net profit increased 72 percent to \$60.4 million. Chief Executive Officer Andrew Reeves is on a base salary of \$1.2 million, having received a 9 percent pay rise this year.

The proposed deal, hailed as a "win" by the United Workers Union (UWU) bureaucracy, is scarcely better than the original offer: a 13.12 percent pay "rise" over three years, comprising 5.12 percent this year and 4 percent increases in 2024 and 2025.

This is not a victory for Ingham's workers, but a betrayal by the UWU leadership, all the more stark for its swift execution.

When workers at the Bolivar, SA and Osborne Park, WA plants walked off the job on Friday September 22, they were committed and resolute in their opposition to Ingham's meagre proposal. The union claimed to be putting forward a demand for an 18 percent pay rise over three years, yet by the morning of Wednesday September 27, the bureaucracy was pushing through a

sell-out agreement that falls far short of this figure.

The UWU's claim that "workers have won respect" is not only a diversion from the real wage cut, but also a complete lie. This is starkly exposed by the union's own reports just days earlier, that management had dumped a bin of rotting offal near the protesting workers in an attempt to crush the strike.

What UWU Secretary Tim Kennedy declares "a strong message of hope" is in fact a substantial wage cut in real terms. According to the latest official quarterly figures, annual inflation is at 6 percent. But this vastly understates the scale of the cost-of-living crisis confronting low-paid workers, like those at Ingham's.

Most of the workers who took part in the strike earn just \$25 per hour, little more than the national minimum wage of \$23.23. This is a direct result of union-management enterprise agreements enforced over many years by the UWU and its predecessor, the National Union of Workers (NUW). Over the past decade, wages at Ingham's have increased by just \$5 per hour in nominal terms.

These same UWU/NUW-brokered deals have allowed the unlimited use of casual and labour-hire workers since at least 2006 and enforced a ban on toilet breaks, in the name of "productivity improvements".

Steve McCartney, WA secretary of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), which also covers some of the Ingham's workers, stated "these guys have been getting used to getting paid low wages and don't want to push back too hard because of the intimidation."

In other words, the union-enforced suppression of struggle over decades has ensured wages are so low that workers are compelled to accept any sell-out deal.

The sellout of the Ingham's strike follows a similar

pattern to that employed by the UWU in several major disputes in recent years. A key component of these union operations is the isolation of workers from the broader working class.

While Ingham's has 12 processing plants around the country, the strike was limited to just two facilities, minimising the impact on profits and undermining workers' power as essential elements in the food supply.

In 2020-2021, major supermarket chain Coles locked out 350 workers at its distribution centre in Smeaton Grange, in southwest Sydney, for more than three months, in response to demands for increased pay, redundancy and redeployment provisions, ahead of the warehouse's planned closure.

The UWU leadership insisted nothing could be done to prevent the loss of jobs. To ensure that this was true, the union made no attempt to appeal to, or even inform, workers in other Coles warehouses—where the union also had coverage—and allowed the company to establish “pop-up” distribution centres to ensure the impact of the shutdown on profits was negligible.

Despite the determined resistance of workers who voted down virtually unchanged union-management agreements more than 10 times, and held out with no strike pay for 14 weeks, the UWU was ultimately able to wear them down and ram through a sell-out deal.

Late last year, Pampas bread and pastry workers were herded back to work by the union leadership with a real wage-slashing 4.5 percent nominal pay increase after four weeks on strike. The UWU declared this a “historic win,” even though the deal fell far short of workers' original demand for 8 percent, or even the meagre 6 percent claim advanced by the union.

In reality, the UWU had engineered the “vote” to return to work, in which only some of the strikers were given a say, through a campaign of isolation and financial deprivation designed to convince workers the company offer was the best they could get. Despite the union's vast financial resources—some \$300 million in assets—workers received only two payments of \$500 in strike pay over the four weeks, a mere fraction of their regular wage.

As they did in these previous disputes, the Australian pseudo-left weighed in to promote the deal and whitewash the role of the union. *Solidarity* declared “Ingham's strikes show the way to fight for real wage

raises,” despite acknowledging that “the pay deal still falls short of maintaining real wages” and that “some workers wanted to continue the strike.”

The purpose of this is to keep workers chained to the unions and shut down any independent mobilisation of workers for decent wages and conditions. The experience of the Ingham's workers shows once again that workers need to draw conclusions as to the real nature of the unions and their role as the industrial police force of big business.

Workers at Ingham's and elsewhere need their own organisations, democratically elected rank-and-file committees that are independent of the trade union apparatus. Through these committees, workers can develop demands based on their own interests and needs, and link up with their counterparts across industries and around the world to mount a unified struggle for these demands.

They are not only up against their corporate bosses, which reap massive profits while workers are driven into poverty, but the unions, the pro-business Labor government and the industrial courts. This poses the need to fight for a new political perspective, a socialist alternative to capitalism, under which workers' interests are completely subordinated to the profits demands of the financial and corporate elite.



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