

1,500 Australian Woolworths workers begin indefinite strike

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Over 1,500 workers at Woolworths supermarket and liquor distribution centres began indefinite strike action yesterday, establishing pickets outside three warehouses in Victoria and one in Sydney, New South Wales.

Workers at Lineage Cold Storage in Laverton, Victoria, which supplies Woolworths, also began an indefinite strike today.

The workers are taking a powerful stand against the attempt by the company to suppress wages, amid the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, and to enforce punitive workplace conditions associated with ever-greater automation.

What has become clear, on only the second day of the stoppage, is that workers are up against powerful forces. That includes one of the largest corporations in the country, Woolworths. But ranged against the strike are also the media, the federal Labor government and the whole political establishment.

The very morning after the strike began, Labor's workplace relations minister Murray Watt was asked about it in a Channel 7 television interview. The introduction by the host Natalie Barr summed up the anti-worker propaganda that will be deployed against the strike.

Barr bemoaned the threat of "chaos" for "Christmas shoppers," and spoke of the dangers of supermarket shortages, as though that is the fault of workers and not the company, which is attacking their wages and forcing them to work in intolerable conditions.

But more significant than these talking points was Watt's response. He touted the fact that Woolworths has "lots of contingency plans in place to make sure that supplies will be available." And he called on the company and the United Workers Union (UWU) to ensure a deal to end the strike as quickly as possible. Watt said he was "confident" that such an agreement would be stitched up, and the stoppage wound up with minimal disruption. On what does Watt base his "confidence"? What behind-the-scenes deals are being orchestrated by the company-government-union conspiracy to force the workers back to work?

His comments point to the political issues that workers face. First of all, they are in a political struggle against the government, which is determined to snuff out the strike and

ensure a return to "business as usual."

The Labor government has presided over the biggest reversal to working-class living standards in decades, with workers having lost about 9 percent of their purchasing power over the past three years. Labor knows that this agenda, in the interests of big business and the ultra wealthy, has produced massive anger. It is terrified that the Woolworths stoppage will spread and ignite a wave of struggles by workers who confront an identical assault on their pay and conditions.

That is the only way that this strike can be won. Workers can only defeat the combined machinations of Woolworths and the government by mobilising other sections of the working class. A powerful appeal can be made to workers throughout Woolworths operations, in other warehouses and the supermarkets, to join the strike action. An appeal should also be made to Coles workers, and workers across the warehousing sector, at corporations such as Amazon.

But a warning must be made. Such a broadening of the strike is exactly what the UWU leadership is determined to prevent.

The UWU has only called out workers at five warehouses, leaving at least 15 in full operation. That is a transparent attempt to minimise the stoppages' impact, and to isolate the strikers. This is not a one off.

While the striking workers are calling for a national agreement, the current set-up engineered by the UWU and its predecessors means every Woolworths warehouse is covered by a separate Enterprise Agreement (EA). As a result, workers face pay and other disparities, and it helps the company to pick workers off, warehouse by warehouse, every three years when new EAs are negotiated.

Even before the strike began, the UWU leadership was signalling its willingness to do a dirty deal with company management. Workers have demanded *annual* pay rises of between 10 and 12 percent, as a starting point to make up for years of stagnant pay as inflation was soaring. The company, however, is offering just 10 to 12 percent over two to three years, a figure that is barely in line with the understated official inflation rate and miles behind the real increases to mortgages, rents and other necessities.

But despite the huge disparity between what workers need and what the company is offering, UWU national secretary Tim

Kennedy told the Murdoch-owned *Australian* that for an agreement to be reached, the company's wage offer is "going to have to be at least a percent or a percent-and-a-half higher." Such a deal would be a sellout, handing the company exactly what it wants. Kennedy more or less admitted that, saying that the company "could do that easily."

And the issue of pay does not even come close to exhausting the dispute. Workers are up against a management regime that is making life unbearable, as the company squeezes every drop of labour from workers that it can.

At one of the strike protests yesterday, a worker told the WSWs about the impossible conditions associated with the new "performance framework." Under it, workers are given a percentage score, as to whether they are fulfilling their tasks.

But as the worker said, "They have a metric and they are not transparent on how they calculate '100 percent performance.' There is a certain amount of time for going to the toilet and other things like that.

"There are so many variables that we can't see how they calculate the 100 percent that everyone is supposed to reach. They don't take into consideration the age, shape or size of people or their abilities. They expect everyone to reach 100 percent." The worker noted "an increase in injuries associated with lifting heavy boxes. When you increase the pressure to perform, your standards drop and you're more likely to take risks you wouldn't necessarily take, like lifting incorrectly."

He said that "There is surveillance in the factory. So if you are under the framework and if you have more than a ten minute gap, they'll look on their surveillance cameras to see what you were doing and why you took ten minutes in between orders. So it's well and truly surveillance in there."

These are the conditions associated with Amazon and other new logistics companies, where workers have no rights and are treated as modern-day slaves. Woolworths has suspended the "framework" while EA negotiations are underway, so that the company can simply reimpose it after a deal is done.

This shows that workers are not only involved in an immediate dispute over pay, but a major struggle over their basic rights and the future of their workplaces. Such a struggle cannot be waged at a handful of warehouses, but requires a far broader mobilisation involving the strength of the entire Woolworths workforce and the wider working class.

The UWU is opposed to such a fight. That is why, at the pickets outside the striking warehouses yesterday, UWU officials accosted Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaigners in Sydney and Melbourne, and sought to prevent them from speaking to workers. The union bureaucracy is hostile to the SEP, because it is fighting to broaden the strike and develop a democratic discussion on the way forward.

And the UWU leadership does not want the SEP to warn workers of its long record of sellouts and treachery. Over recent years, the union bureaucracy has facilitated wholesale restructuring at Coles and Woolworths, including the abolition

of existing warehouses and the establishment of new, highly automated facilities with much smaller workforces.

A warning of what is being prepared was provided in the 2021–22 dispute at the Coles Smeaton Grange warehouse in Sydney. In response to limited action by workers, company management imposed a brutal, 14-week lockout.

The UWU refused to provide strike pay and isolated the Smeaton Grange workers, ensuring that production continued at every other facility. The union always supported the closure of Smeaton Grange, insisting that nothing could be done to prevent it. Initially, however, the UWU leadership claimed to be fighting for improved redundancy provisions. But over the course of the dispute, it dropped all of its demands. The union and the company forced workers to vote over and over against on one rotten sell-out after another.

There was a significant rebellion, with workers repeatedly voting down the rotten deals. The UWU was furious that the SEP helped to expose its isolation operation and the bankrupt agreements the union was pushing on behalf of management. Eventually, workers were worn down and the sellout forced through. A similar pattern has occurred at every other major dispute involving the UWU since.

That is because the union leadership does not represent workers. It is a privileged bureaucracy that does the bidding of the companies and is a prominent player in the big-business Labor Party that is responsible for the assault on wages and conditions across the board.

To prevent a sellout, and to broaden their fight, Woolworths warehouse workers should establish rank-and-file committees, controlled by workers themselves, not the UWU bureaucrats. Such committees could spread the strike to the other Woolworths facilities still operating. They could appeal to Coles and other warehouse workers to join this fight.

Above all, they could discuss the political fight that workers are in, against the company management, big business as a whole and the Labor government and develop a program to unite workers in both Australia and globally who are facing the exact same struggles.



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