

Australian warehouse workers speak out as Woolworths strike continues

Our reporters

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More than 1,500 Woolworths supermarket and liquor distribution centre workers remain on strike after downing tools last Thursday. The workers, at three warehouses in Victoria and one in New South Wales, are standing up against the company's miserly wage offer and increasingly arduous working conditions.

Woolworths, which, operating in a duopoly with Coles, controls two-thirds of Australia's grocery market, reported a net profit after tax last year of \$1.71 billion. The company's distribution centre workers, however, have been offered nominal pay increases of between 3 and 4 percent per annum, far short of what is needed to keep up with the soaring cost of living or make up for previous losses.

As well as wages, Woolworths workers are opposing the impossible conditions associated with the company's "Coaching and Productivity Framework" introduced early this year. Under the system, workers are constantly monitored and must complete all tasks within the time set by management to achieve a rating of 100 percent. Anything less is considered failure, meaning workers are then "counselled and may be disciplined." For the many casuals employed in Woolworths warehouses, that can mean termination.

What has quickly become clear is that workers are not only up against Woolworths, the largest private-sector employer in the country, but a union bureaucracy that is already angling to sell them out.

Even before the strike began, United Workers Union (UWU) National Secretary Tim Kennedy stated publicly that the company would only need to increase its offer by a meagre 1 to 1.5 percent a year—far below the 10–12 percent annual pay increases workers are demanding.

The day after the strike began, workers also began an indefinite strike at Lineage Cold Storage in Laverton,

which primarily supplies Woolworths. Workers told the World Socialist Web Site that 95 percent of deliveries from the facility go to the company's supermarkets around Victoria.

Lineage, a Michigan-based multi-national corporation, is the largest refrigerated warehouse company in the world and has more than a dozen cold storage facilities in Australia.

The WSWS spoke to two striking workers at the Laverton facility, who asked to remain anonymous and are referred to here under pseudonyms.

They said the company had initially offered workers a nominal pay rise of 9 percent over three years, although this was subsequently increased to around 12 percent over the same period. Katie said, "the CEO came in and said it's the best the company can offer and they are not going to budge."

Workers are asking for an 18 percent rise over three years which, as Mark explained, is far short of what is required to keep up with the soaring cost of living: "We need at least a 50 percent increase in wages, but we are not asking for this, we are only asking for six, six and six."

"My home loan interest rate has gone up to 7 percent [from 2.6 percent] in the last three years. At least half my wage is going on housing costs. Essentials such as gas and electricity have also gone up, buying from the shops has gone up, then there's petrol."

Like many workers, Mark said that the impact of inflation meant he has to work huge amounts of overtime just to make ends meet: "I do five days per week, 12-hour shifts, just to provide for my family. I don't have enough money to shop at Woolies, I have to shop around for food. We are not asking for a million dollars, we are asking for enough money to survive."

Katie agreed: “Even if workers do overtime, they still can’t afford to live.”

Both workers related similar gruelling productivity demands to those reported by Woolworths employees. Mark said, “if we don’t meet the KPIs [key performance indicators] they start pulling us up. We have to do 170 cartons an hour. They colour code your work and if you are in the red, they start asking why not.” He said he often has to “work through my lunch breaks just to make deadlines.”

Katie said: “There is a high number of injuries, lower-back injuries, shoulder... We even had a guy hit by the machines—we have forklifts and pickers around each other.”

Mark added: “Sometimes there are 1,000 kilo pallets and I’ve seen them just drop out of the rack.”

This contributed to a high turnover of staff, Katie said: “A lot of people come and go every week, even the managers. What people are told in the interviews is not the reality, so people leave.

“The more pressure they put on the workers the more they get worn out, especially when you are doing 12-hour shifts.” This pressure was particularly levelled against casuals, who, she said, “are threatened that if they don’t meet their targets, ‘we won’t call you back again.’”

These casuals, who make up around 50 percent of the workforce, are engaged under third-party labour hire, meaning they are not covered by the enterprise agreement and have no legal right to take part in the strike. Mark said he had been told that “the labour-hire casuals have gone to [another Lineage site] in order to get stock out.”

Mark and Katie said that workers had started working extra shifts around a month ago, in order to save money in preparation for the strike. There is no indication that the UWU, which controls hundreds of millions of dollars worth of assets acquired from workers’ dues, will provide strike pay to the Lineage workers.

Mark said they were up against a company that “cares more about their bottom line than about the workers. They don’t care about how we feel or suffer because they don’t really suffer themselves.

“That’s why we’re making a stand right now, to prove to everyone else what can be done and fight for what’s right.”



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