

Build rank-and-file committees to expand the Woolworths struggle! Mobilise workers to defeat the company's strike-breaking operation!

Socialist Equality Party (Australia)

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Two weeks in, a strike involving more than 1,800 workers at five warehouses owned by or supplying Woolworths supermarkets is at a critical turning point. In full collaboration with the state and federal Labor governments, Australia's largest private sector employer has tried repeatedly to break the picket and forcibly reopen the largest facility, at Dandenong South.

After the overt, police-backed, strike-breaking operation was thwarted for a second day by workers and protesters, the company, urged on by the federal Labor government, applied to the Fair Work Commission (FWC) to have the dispute shut down. The case will be heard by the pro-business industrial tribunal on Friday morning.

Large numbers of workers from throughout Woolworths, Coles and more broadly must be rapidly mobilised to defend the strike, or this important struggle will be crushed.

This is a major attack on the democratic rights of the entire working class, highly restricted though they already are by the country's draconian anti-strike laws. Woolworths workers are undertaking legal, supposedly "protected" industrial action, seeking a real wage increase after years of cuts and equal pay for equal work across the warehouses, which are all currently covered by separate enterprise agreements, with differing rates of pay.

They are also demanding an end to the company's dangerous and punitive "Coaching and Productivity Framework," under which workers are closely timed and intrusively monitored, and face disciplinary action, including possible termination, if they fail to achieve a rating of 100 percent.

The company's moves to smash this strike, backed by Labor and the industrial courts and cheered on by the corporate media, have demonstrated that the ruling class will not tolerate such a struggle, even within the strictures of the repressive industrial relations system.

The rapidity with which Woolworths and the state have resorted to brute force and provocative police operations to break the picket demonstrates that the stakes extend far beyond the bounds of a single warehouse or company.

For the ruling elite, this dispute is "ground zero," as a headline in the *Australian* proclaimed on Tuesday, in a "battle over

productivity." Australia's major corporations and financial institutions are watching intently as workers try to fight back against the imposition of Amazon-style speed-ups and stepped-up monitoring, aimed at extracting ever-greater profits from their labour.

The ruling elite is acutely aware of the explosive atmosphere in which this strike is taking place. Opposition is mounting to Labor and the entire political establishment over a deepening cost-of-living crisis, in which Woolworths and its duopoly partner Coles are also sharply implicated. Their concern is that a broader outbreak of the class struggle must be avoided at all costs.

The United Workers Union (UWU) is playing a critical role in undermining the Woolworths workers' struggle. Far from urgently mobilising any of the almost 150,000 workers it claims to represent to defend against the attack on the picket, the UWU has sought to cover it up, with hardly even a word on its social media accounts about the extraordinary management-government assault on its members.

Instead, the UWU bureaucracy has continued to engage in backroom discussions with Woolworths and the federal Labor government—the very forces conspiring against the striking workers—aiming to quickly broker a deal to end the strike.

Even before the strike began, UWU National Secretary Tim Kennedy told the *Australian* Woolworths would only have to lift its miserly 3–4 percent pay "rise" offer by 1–1.5 percent, abandoning workers' demand for 10–12 percent per annum increases.

Last week, the UWU bureaucracy subjected striking workers to a parade of Labor MPs and Australian Council of Trade Union (ACTU) leaders. The UWU was not only promoting these hostile forces as allies, but directly working with these agents of big business who were plotting to sabotage the strike.

Woolworths' strikebreaking plan was enabled in part by an agreement brokered last week with the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association (SDA), whose national secretary serves on the Labor Party's National Executive and is the senior vice president of the ACTU.

The ACTU has fully supported the federal Labor government's

recent placing of the construction division of the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU) under quasi-dictatorial administration, stripping 80,000 building workers of basic rights in order to drive down labour costs in the construction industry. This is part of a broader onslaught by Labor on working-class wages and conditions, which the ACTU is both enforcing and covering up with fraudulent proclamations of “real wage growth.”

The UWU is employing the same modus operandi it has used to sell out every major dispute in its five-year history: isolate striking workers, deny them adequate strike pay and refuse to mobilise broader layers of the working class. This method is engineered to wear workers down until they begrudgingly accept a rotten deal.

If Woolworths workers are to succeed in their fight for decent wages and safe conditions, they will have to break this pattern and take matters into their own hands. Under the control of the UWU bureaucracy, the strike will be smashed, if not by management and the police then by the union itself, through a sell-out deal or through the enforcement of an anti-democratic bargaining order from the industrial courts.

This means workers have to take the power back by building rank-and-file committees in every warehouse, democratically run by workers themselves, independently of the union or management.

The urgent and immediate task of these committees is to establish connections with broad layers of workers at other Woolworths warehouses, Coles and throughout the logistics sector. Plans must be prepared and put in place to ensure that any further management-police attacks, at Dandenong South or elsewhere, are met with a mass picket.

The strike must be expanded across all warehouses owned by Woolworths and its suppliers, as well as its main competitor Coles. While Woolworths employees across the country are impacted by the brutal “Framework,” similar punishing regimes are in place in warehouses everywhere and the cost-of-living crisis is universal.

This must include a fight to win over workers in facilities covered by the SDA, Transport Workers Union (TWU) or any other union, as well as the many who are not union members. The isolation of workers, workplace by workplace and union by union, enforced by the union bureaucracies, is deliberately engineered to divide the working class and deprive it of its strength.

Workers should demand full strike pay from the UWU’s massive financial resources—\$274.9 million in assets and \$86.4 million in annual membership revenue. This money belongs to workers!

Woolworths workers must insist on full transparency of all negotiations on their wages and conditions or the dispute itself, whether with management, government, the ACTU, or any other party. All such meetings must be open for any worker to attend and participate in. No more behind-closed-doors meetings and backroom deals!

The demands fought for must be democratically determined by workers, based on their actual needs, not what the union bureaucrats say management will accept. The complete list of what is required can only be established through the broadest discussion among workers, but the following provides a basic starting point:

- Equal pay for equal work across all Woolworths/Primary

Connect and supplier warehouses, based on an immediate 25 percent increase to the highest current pay rate across the country in each classification, to make up for current inflation and previous losses. Standardisation of classifications across different facilities must be determined by rank-and-file workers, not management.

- All future pay rises linked to inflation, with a monthly cost-of-living adjustment to prevent workers from falling behind.

- Abolish the “Framework” and “engineered standards”! This means an end to all dangerous, punitive speed-ups and monitoring, whatever name management attaches to them. The whole concept that workers must have every last drop of blood squeezed from them in order to satisfy corporate profit demands must be repudiated.

- Workers’ control of production! Safe, sustainable pick rates would be determined by rank-and-file committees for the purpose of setting staffing levels and rosters, not punishing and humiliating workers.

- No job cuts from automation! Under workers’ control, advancements in technology can be used to reduce workload and improve safety, not throw workers on the scrapheap.

No doubt Woolworths, along with the union bureaucrats and the Labor government, will insist these demands are unaffordable and impossible. This raises the fundamental question of which class rules society. As long as control of production is in the hands of big business and finance capital, workers will face an ever-deepening assault on their jobs, wages, conditions and safety.

Workers everywhere, whether in warehousing or any other industry, in Australia and globally, confront this same fundamental fact. This underscores the need for a unified political struggle by the working class against the capitalist system and all its organs, including Labor and the trade unions.

The fight for decent wages and safe conditions at Woolworths is inseparable from the fight for a socialist movement aimed at placing all major industries under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class.



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