

Australian rank-and-file health workers support Woolworths workers' strike

Health Workers Rank-and File Committee
6 December 2024

To the 1,800 striking Woolworths and Lineage Cold Storage workers:

The Health Workers Rank-and File Committee—a group of doctors, nurses, pathology and ancillary health workers from across Australia—extends its full support and solidarity to striking Woolworths and Lineage Cold Storage workers. Your fight for decent wages and against unsafe and worsening working conditions, is our fight and is a battle that must be actively supported and taken up by workers across Australia.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained, the cost-cutting 3–4 percent per year wage rise agreement that Woolworths is demanding and its “Coaching and Productivity Framework” to drive up company profits at the expense of workers’ safety are part of a growing assault on the entire working class.

Woolworths’ brutal speed-up measures—the constant scoring of individual workers and the disciplining of those who fail to meet targets and times, as well as restrictions on bathroom breaks—are a race to the bottom and place your lives and health at risk.

Health workers across the country immediately recognise a commonality with your struggle.

Public and private sector health workers across Australia have been “offered” similar cost-cutting 3 or 3.5 percent per annum pay rise deals by state governments and the private health corporations.

These sorts of agreements, which follow decades of real-wage cuts, the devastating impact of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and government funding cuts, have pushed the public health sector to the brink. Health workers face widespread understaffing and increasingly impossible workloads, excessive overtime and double shifts with little-to-no breaks.

Your strike has reached a critical stage, where it is

necessary to recognise who are your friends and who are your enemies.

You are not only up against Woolworths, one of Australia’s largest corporations, but the Albanese Labor government, the capitalist state and the corporate media.

This was clearly revealed in this week’s attempt to break your picket and forcibly re-open the Dandenong South warehouse.

The most important thing to recognise, however, is that you are in battle against the United Workers Union (UWU) bureaucracy, which is collaborating with Woolworths management in behind-closed-door discussions. This is not to take forward your fight but on the contrary to concoct a deal that retains the major corporation’s business model and serves its profit interests.

This is indicated in the union’s determined efforts to keep you isolated from your brothers and sisters in Woolworths warehouses and other outlets nationally and from those employed by Coles, the other supermarket giant.

The UWU has nearly 150,000 members but instead of mobilising them to defend and join your actions, the UWU has barely said a word about the police attack on the picket.

That UWU secretary Tim Kennedy has publicly declared that Woolworths only needs to increase its offer by 1 to 1.5 percent per annum to settle the dispute, abandoning your demands for annual pay rises of 10–12 percent, is a serious warning. It demonstrates that the fight for decent wages and conditions that meet your needs, cannot and will not be won if it remains in the hands of the union leadership.

UWU officials and other highly paid union bureaucrats make patronising speeches on your picket

lines, but the union, which has \$274.9 million in total assets, refuses to give you any strike pay. This is designed to starve you back to work.

Built by workers in the late 19th century to defend their wages and conditions, the trade unions have been transformed and act as an industrial police force, isolating and dividing workers struggles on behalf of the employers.

As health workers we have had plenty of similar experiences—too many to list here—with the health sector unions who have divided and isolated us sector by sector, even within the same hospital workplaces and state by state across Australia.

Public sector nurses and midwives across New South Wales (NSW) have taken mass strike action three times this year, demonstrating their determination to fight. However, the union has isolated nurses from other healthcare and public sector workers facing similar attacks, while promoting feckless appeals to the very Labor government that is carrying out the attack on wages and conditions.

We urge you to take matters into your own hands and form rank-and-file committees, controlled by workers themselves, not the union bureaucrats, and to broaden your industrial action to other sectors of industry.

Through these committees you can democratically formulate and decide on demands that meet the needs of workers, not the parasitic, profit-driven interests of the major corporations and capitalist governments, and mobilise the massive strength of the working class.

The HWRFC stands ready to fight for and with you, sharing information about your struggle widely amongst health workers in hospitals and other health services and building support for you.

We fully agree with the demands outlined in a Socialist Equality Party statement issued on December 5 and urge you to discuss them your fellow strikers:

- 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.

Yours in solidarity,
The Health Workers Rank-and-File Committee



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact