

Australia: Reject union sellout of Woolworths strike!

Martin Scott

9 December 2024

On Saturday afternoon, the United Workers Union (UWU) announced the end of a strike by more than 1,500 Woolworths warehouse workers after 17 days. The UWU's claim that this was a "win" is a fraud—workers have been herded back to work by the union with nothing to show for their courageous struggle.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) urges Woolworths workers to reject this sellout union-management deal. The UWU's shutdown of the strike without workers having the opportunity to examine the proposed agreement and with none of their demands met, is an anti-democratic violation of their determination to fight. Any claim by the union that this means the fight is over is a fraud.

A campaign must be built now for workers to vote "no" when the proposed agreement is put to a formal ballot, and to resume the fight for real improvements to wages and conditions.

This means workers need to take matters into their own hands, in opposition to the bureaucratic leadership of the UWU which has engineered this return to work in collaboration with state and federal Labor governments, the industrial courts, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and Woolworths itself.

Rank-and-file committees, democratically led by workers themselves, must be built urgently as the mechanism through which workers can defeat the joint attack by this lineup of forces. This will require the mobilisation of broad layers of the working class, starting with the many thousands of workers in other Woolworths distribution centres who all confront declining real wages and are subjected to the harsh and punitive "Framework."

Few details of the company's "revised offer" have been made public, but what little has been said by the UWU bureaucracy makes clear that its deal with management is nothing short of a betrayal.

The central demand in the strike was for the abolition of the "Coaching and Productivity Framework," under which workers are constantly monitored, tracked and subject to reprisal if they fail to meet arbitrary and ever-increasing performance targets.

Under the "revised offer," the hated "Framework" will remain in place, with token modifications that will do nothing to protect workers from the company's relentless demand for speed-ups.

According to the UWU, a new clause will "be added to workplace agreements that ensures that the workers will not be disciplined for the speed that they can work at, and an acknowledgement that not everybody can pick at 100%." The union claims that this "breaks the link between measuring the speed of [employees'] work and automatic punishment if they fall

behind."

In other words, workers will still be constantly timed and surveilled and face disciplinary action, including possible termination, if they fail to achieve performance levels demanded by management. The changes merely mean that this will be at the discretion of management, rather than determined solely by an algorithm, and that the precise performance demands may differ between workers.

The dangerous conditions created by the "Framework"—workers pressured to rush, cut corners on safety and push themselves to breaking point physically and mentally—will not be alleviated because it is a manager, not a computer program, telling them to shape up or ship out.

These minor tweaks are not a "win" for workers. The sole purpose of the "Framework," unchanged by this deal, is to constantly increase workload and exploitation of workers in order to extract ever-growing profits. The data collected will be used to throw those who fail to meet the demands for stepped-up productivity on the scrapheap.

They are considered a "win" by the UWU, because they address the union's sole objection to the "Framework"—that by automating the process, the union bureaucracy is cut out of its customary role as the factory-floor enforcer of management dictates.

While the union described the pay rise outcome only as "above-inflation," comments from workers on social media indicate that the nominal increases are in the vicinity of 4 percent per annum.

This is barely an improvement on the company's original offer and a far cry from the initial demand advanced by workers for 10–12 percent per annum. It even falls short of the "percent or a percent-and-a-half higher" than the company's original offer, flagged as acceptable by UWU National Secretary Tim Kennedy before the strike began.

Workers' demands for equal pay for equal work across the company's many warehouses were also abandoned. Woolworths' warehouses will still be covered under separate enterprise agreements, with differing pay and conditions at each, and no protection from lower rates being imposed and jobs slashed as the company closes down facilities and replaces them with more highly automated new distribution centres.

The vote on Saturday to return to work, despite none of workers' demands having been met, was an anti-democratic sham engineered by the UWU bureaucracy, which did everything in its power to convince workers there was no alternative.

Friday's Fair Work Commission (FWC) ruling, the union from blocking access to, or inciting others to block access to, the Dandenong South warehouse, along with three other facilities not directly involved in the dispute, was seized upon by the UWU as a pretext to completely shut down the strikes.

Three of the four striking warehouses were not impacted by the ruling, and there was no legal requirement for any of the strikes to end, but, within 24 hours, the UWU had shut down the entire dispute and pushed through the sellout deal. In effect, while the FWC sought to ban the strike at one factory, the UWU outlawed it at all of the warehouses.

The ruling was the product of a joint effort by Woolworths, Labor, the ACTU and the UWU itself to undermine and sabotage the strike.

Last Monday, the company sought to forcibly reopen the Dandenong South warehouse with the aid of police sent by the state Labor government. This came after Woolworths struck a deal with the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association (SDA)—a key section of the ACTU—allowing the company to claim that some workers wanted to go back to work.

When this strikebreaking attempt was blocked by workers and supporters, Woolworths immediately used this to justify its application to the FWC for the picket to be banned. The response of the UWU was to intensify its back-room negotiations with management and the federal Labor government.

At the same time, the UWU deliberately isolated the striking workers from the rest of the union's more than 140,000 members, not saying a word on its social media accounts about the company's strikebreaking efforts and blocking any broader mobilisation of workers in support of the strike.

Instead, the UWU engaged in an ongoing promotion of Labor MPs and ACTU leaders—some of the very forces who were plotting to smash the strike.

The events of the past week underscore that workers at Woolworths, and throughout the working class, are not just up against the corporations that employ them but Labor, the unions and the industrial courts as well.

This poses the urgent necessity for workers 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 Woolworths deal must be rejected as the sellout that it is, and plans developed and put in motion through these committees for the strikes to be reinstated and the fight resumed.

At stake are the pay and conditions of workers throughout the warehouse sector, where punitive measures including the "Framework" have been imposed globally in a race to the bottom with the likes of Amazon.

That shows the struggle must be expanded, across all warehouses owned by Woolworths and its suppliers as well as its main competitor Coles, and 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 fight must be for demands based on what workers actually need, not what the union leadership says is achievable. At a

which, these should include:

- 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.

These demands raise 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.

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 and throughout the warehouse sector is inseparable from the fight for a socialist movement aimed at placing all major industries under public ownership and democratic workers' control.



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