

Australian pseudo-left Socialist Alternative covers up union sellout at Woolworths

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For 17 days in November-December, more than 1,500 workers at four Woolworths warehouses carried out one of the largest and most significant strikes in recent years. They were joined by a further 300 workers at a fifth facility, Lineage Cold Storage, which is a key supply chain partner of Woolworths.

The strike brought workers into conflict with the entire political establishment, including Labor governments at the state and federal levels and the industrial courts. However, the United Workers Union (UWU) bureaucracy seized upon a bargaining order from the pro-business Fair Work Commission (FWC) as a pretext to shut down the strike on December 7 before ramming through a sellout deal.

The enterprise agreement pushed through by the union does not meet workers' main demand—abolition of the performance monitoring “Framework,” Woolworths' system of constant electronic tracking and surveillance, under which workers face disciplinary action and possible sacking if they fail to meet management's arbitrary and often impossible performance targets.

Moreover, while workers had demanded annual pay rises of 10–12 percent, the union-management deal contains nominal wage increases averaging around 4 percent per annum.

Socialist Alternative and its parochial, state-based electoral front, Victorian Socialists, aided and abetted the UWU's sellout operation. The pseudo-left organisation and its publication, *Red Flag*, served as the UWU's public relations agency throughout the strike.

Socialist Alternative provided political cover for the bureaucracy, uttering not a word of criticism as the union isolated the dispute, denied workers strike pay and openly vowed to undercut their wage demands. Central to this was concealing from workers the UWU's filthy track record of betrayals across the warehousing industry.

Throughout the strike, Socialist Alternative members were welcomed to the pickets by UWU officials, play-acting “solidarity” to conceal the union's refusal to mobilise broader layers of workers.

Meanwhile, Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaigners were repeatedly blocked by the bureaucracy from speaking to striking workers. The reason for this stark dichotomy: While the pseudo-left promote and defend the bureaucracy, the SEP tells workers the truth, that the only way forward is through a rebellion against the union leadership and a political struggle against the capitalist system and all of its organs.

Socialist Alternative did not express a word of opposition when the UWU leadership abruptly shut down the strike, nor have they since. Instead, they have published several articles lauding the morale-boosting effect of the strike and suggesting that the outcome of the dispute—that is, betrayal by the bureaucracy—is essentially irrelevant. This was starkly expressed in a December 21 *Red Flag* article by

Jerome Small, who claimed the striking workers were owed “a huge debt” for “showing that our side had some power.”

While noting that the workers did not “win everything they deserve,” the article is a cynical attempt to cover up for the UWU bureaucracy and support its phoney declaration of victory.

Central to the strike was workers' demand to abolish the “Framework.” In an attempt to conceal the fact that the union-management deal does no such thing, Small claims, “The result doesn't leave workers empty-handed on their most important issue.”

The new “Productivity, Performance and Accuracy” clause added to the enterprise agreements merely stipulates that “no team member will be disciplined, solely on the basis of not performing in line with the expected engineered standard for the site, provided that they are working to the ‘best of their ability.’”

This deliberately vague phrase requires, at a minimum, “applying reasonable effort to meet performance expectations and minimising excessive gaps; and operating machinery to the required levels...”

The protection from discipline “does not apply to a team member during their probationary period and when assessing the team member's ability to meet the inherent requirements of their role.”

In other words, any worker who completes the probationary period will be deemed capable of “performing in line with the expected engineered standard.” Management can then claim that anyone failing to meet these targets is not working to the “best of their ability.”

The clause will not end the invasive and constant surveillance of Woolworths warehouse workers or prevent them from being subjected to disciplinary measures, including termination, over slow pick rates or “excessive gaps,” such as toilet and water breaks.

At best, it breaks the *automatic* connection between workers failing to pick at 100 percent and being disciplined. This suits the union officialdom perfectly, as it maintains their integrated role as an industrial police force of management.

On other key aspects of the dispute, Small attributes the UWU's abandonment of workers' demands entirely to the company's refusal to agree to them.

The only explanation he offers for the discrepancy between the demand of workers for pay rises of 10–12 percent per annum and the UWU “win” of 3–4.7 percent is that “Woolworths was determined to keep the headline pay rates low.”

The demand for common enterprise agreement expiry dates at the five facilities involved in the strike, which would have allowed workers to again take protected industrial action in unison, was not realised, Small contends, because “management viewed it as a threat to their ongoing power to divide and conquer the workforce.”

Small is trying to lead workers to a definite conclusion: Taking on a

major company and winning is impossible.

But there is more than mere fatalism to Small's characterisation of Woolworths as simply too strong. It is a deliberate attempt to conceal and excuse the UWU bureaucracy's role in selling out the striking workers and imposing the demands of management.

Small even put the refusal of the UWU leadership to mobilise broader sections of the working class down to "management's strategy" to "suck the energy out of the dispute by closing the warehouses," supposedly depriving strikers of the opportunity to "put their case in front of other workers."

By this absurd logic, the company's move to forcibly reopen the Dandenong South warehouse should have revived the dispute, led to a mass mobilisation of workers in support of the strike, and resulted in a resounding victory.

In reality, the UWU responded to Woolworths' police-backed attempt to crush a legally "protected" strike with total silence on social media, keeping most of its more than 140,000 members, and the broader working class, in the dark and at a safe distance.

Socialist Alternative was totally complicit in this, presenting its members' participation in "community pickets" as a substitute for the involvement of broader layers of workers. This pantomime of class struggle is perfectly acceptable to the ruling elite, because it presents no threat of the fight for improved wages and conditions being expanded to other workplaces and companies.

Small hints at the possibility of an alternative, rhetorically asking, "What would it have taken to secure a more sweeping win?" But the honest answer to this question is what Socialist Alternative is desperate to hide: Victory in this dispute would have required a rank-and-file rebellion against the bureaucratic leadership of the UWU. This right-wing organisation is integral to the Labor Party and its governments.

Noting that "Arguably, the Woolworths dispute was a brilliant opportunity to break through Australia's restrictive industrial laws," Small offers no explanation as to why the UWU and the rest of the union apparatus prevented the working class from seizing this "opportunity."

This is not an accident or an aberration. Since the Accords of the 1980s and 1990s, union bureaucracies have worked in close collaboration with successive Labor governments to divide the working class, workplace by workplace, through the introduction of enterprise bargaining and impose tight constraints on their ability to strike through the Fair Work Act.

This is part of the broader transformation of the unions in Australia and around the world. In an earlier period, these organisations could extract limited concessions from employers and governments within a highly regulated national framework. But the globalisation of production, starting in the 1980s, obliterated the basis for such reforms. Now, the unions are increasingly integrated into the mechanisms of big business and finance capital, and aim to ensure the "international competitiveness" of Australian corporations, by imposing continuous cuts to jobs, wages and conditions.

Socialist Alternative, along with the rest of the pseudo-left, continually promote the corporatised trade unions and excuse their betrayals, because they represent the same upper middle-class interests. They serve as the last line of defence for the bourgeoisie, using anti-capitalist rhetoric, as well as calls for greater militancy and a fight against the anti-strike laws, as a mechanism to keep workers locked into the framework of the union bureaucracy and Labor.

Exemplifying this, Small whitewashes the role of state and federal

Labor governments, whose sole offence in the Woolworths dispute, according to Small, was that they "declined to endorse any of the workers' demands."

In fact, the federal Labor government was involved throughout the strike in backroom discussions with Woolworths and the UWU bureaucracy, aimed at shutting down the dispute as quickly as possible. At the state level, the involvement of the police in the company's strikebreaking efforts at Dandenong South was clearly at the behest of the Victorian Labor government. While this was going on, Labor parliamentarians, like Socialist Alternative, were welcomed to the pickets with open arms by the UWU leadership.

To prevent a unified struggle, Small deliberately covers up the fact that this is part of Labor's broader assault on the working class. This includes real-wage cuts imposed throughout the public sector, the federal government's imposition of dictatorial administration over the construction division of the CFMEU, and the multiple court challenges against industrial action by rail workers in New South Wales in recent weeks.

The Woolworths strike showed again that the ruling class will not tolerate any attempt by workers to oppose the deepening attack on their wages and conditions. Actions that are entirely "legal," even within the draconian Fair Work Act, are being met with harsh repression from the capitalist state. This poses directly that workers can only defend their basic democratic rights through a unified struggle against the industrial courts and Australia's anti-strike legislation.

The UWU's rapid shutdown of the strike after the FWC ruling is a stark illustration that such a struggle is impossible within the framework of the union apparatus, which co-wrote the laws and relies upon them as a pretext to suppress the class struggle.

Socialist Alternative's defence of the UWU and its betrayal of Woolworths workers is in direct opposition to the perspective of the Socialist Equality Party, which explains that the only way forward for the working class is to build an opposition against the union bureaucracy, which is fundamentally hostile to the interests of workers.

This means workers need new organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees democratically run by workers themselves, independent of the union apparatus and the pseudo-left.

The struggle, at Woolworths and throughout the working class, for real improvements to wages and conditions, including the abolition of punitive performance monitoring and surveillance, requires a fight against capitalism and all of the political forces that defend it, including Labor, the unions and their pseudo-left cheer-squads.

This means a unified political struggle by the working class for a new political perspective, socialism, and the fight to place the banks and major corporations, including Woolworths, under public ownership and democratic workers' control.



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