

More warehouse strikers arrested in Sydney

Erika Zimmer
28 July 1998

Striking warehouse workers picketing Davids Holdings in Sydney are facing escalating attacks from both the company and police. Last Thursday, in a calculated provocation, police arrested another 44 strikers after a mass meeting of 200 workers outside the site began to disperse. The main item under discussion at the meeting had been the fight to reinstate more than 60 already sacked for obstructing delivery trucks.

Fuelling the company's demands for sweeping cuts and conditions is a global restructure of grocery retailing. Smaller supermarkets, such as the Jewel chain supplied by Davids, are becoming unviable with the development of giant stores open day and night. Earlier this year Davids Holdings was taken over by a South African company Metro Cash & Carry, but both companies' share prices have since collapsed.

The strike began on July 8 when more than 400 workers walked out as eight-month-long negotiations between the National Union of Workers (NUW) and the company over an enterprise agreement broke down. As the strike enters its third week the company is hardening its position:

- Davids and some 400 retailers are claiming millions of dollars in compensation from the union.
- The company is demanding the right to casualise half the workforce, increasing its original demand that the casual workforce be increased from 15 to 35 percent in off-peak periods and 50 percent in the peak period.
- Davids is refusing to discuss the reinstatement of sacked workers.

Behind the company's offensive is the confidence that its strikebreaking actions have the support of the state Labor government. On weekdays up to 100 police have escorted delivery trucks and busloads of scabs through picket lines. Frequently police have outnumbered the picketers

Despite this, the NSW Labor Council has refused to

mobilise other workers to support the strikers. Together with the NUW, it is insisting that workers obey the existing industrial relations laws, limiting them to 'peaceful protests' that allow deliveries into and out of the warehouses.

The attack on the Davids Holdings workers will be followed by similar attacks on storemen and packers at other grocery retailers such as Woolworths and Franklins. Yet no other NUW members have been called out in their support.

The scale of the attacks has surprised and disgusted picketing workers. Some who spoke to World Socialist Web Site reporters have begun to question their isolation by the union leadership.

Gary Cripps, an NUW site delegate, was one of the 44 workers arrested last Thursday. He explained what happened. 'A truck tried to ram through a line of workers who had linked arms. It's getting quite ugly down here. The police are being told by the company to outnumber the workers. They are trying to use the police to break up the picket line.'

Greg, who has worked at Davids Holdings for seven years, said: 'The company is trying to introduce 'engineering standards' which means three strikes (failures to meet quotas) and you're out. I wouldn't be surprised if other retailers like Coles and Woolworths are queueing up waiting to see what happens here. I think this is a test case.'

'The police and the union agreed to a protocol. We're following the law but the company isn't. The company is using video cameras and sending out letters to people telling them they're not allowed back. The company used to sit down and talk. Now the laws have changed.'

Chris Frost was perplexed because the workers had even offered to help get the company back on its feet by offering to work under existing conditions for two years without a pay rise, but the company wanted the new conditions without delay.

When asked why the whole union was not out behind the strikers, he said the same question had occurred to him. 'I think this is a test case. I want to ask the union why everyone isn't out.' He expressed bitterness toward the state Labor government headed by Premier Bob Carr. 'Bob Carr promised to change a lot of things and he's gone back on his word. He'll suffer at the next election.'

See Also:

Australian politics in turmoil

[11 July 1998]

Bipartisan line-up against Australian dock workers

Documents reveal Labor had waterfront conspiracy

[3 July 1998]



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact