

Australia: Warehouse workers strike over wages and conditions

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More than 500 workers have taken strike action at a major warehouse operated by supermarket giant Woolworths in the northern Melbourne suburb of Broadmeadows. The industrial action, which began at midnight last Friday, is continuing with 24-hour pickets established outside two warehouses—the Broadmeadows site and another in the nearby suburb of Somerton, where Woolworths is using employment agency casual staff to maintain supplies to its supermarkets. Workers are fighting for a new three-year enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) to include a 6 percent annual pay rise, a limit on the number of casual employees, and improved work shift and break times.

The Broadmeadows distribution centre employs about 200 full-time workers, 250 part-time, and 160 casuals. Those on strike are members of the National Union of Workers (NUW). In a secret ballot conducted by the Australian Electoral Commission last month, they approved by a 98 percent vote “unlimited stoppages of infinite duration”, overtime and paperwork bans, and bans on the loading and unloading of trucks. The industrial action is authorised within the framework of Fair Work Australia, the federal Labor government’s draconian industrial relations regime.

Under Fair Work Australia, which prohibits the right to strike outside EBA negotiations, workers must provide their employers with detailed and advanced forewarning of all industrial action. As a consequence, Woolworths has maintained operations without significant disruption. “We’re using other distribution facilities to do the logistics and it’s working really well,” a company spokeswoman told Associated Press. “There’s absolutely no impact on any deliveries.”

The company has utilised the police and the courts against the workers. Strikers told the *World Socialist Web Site* that on Saturday morning at least four police in three vehicles escorted trucks, one of which had its number plates covered, through the picket established at the Somerton warehouse. Later the same day, at 5 p.m., Woolworths successfully applied to the Victorian Supreme Court for an injunction prohibiting any obstruction to trucks or persons entering the Broadmeadows

and Somerton sites. Yesterday around 200 workers and family members drove to another large Woolworths warehouse in the outer western suburb of Laverton, briefly preventing several trucks from entering.

Workers are now protesting outside several Woolworths supermarkets, informing people of their strike and urging a consumer boycott.

Together with rival company Coles, Woolworths enjoys almost monopoly control over the grocery retail sector. Last August the company announced a \$2 billion annual profit, up 10.1 percent from the year before.

Woolworths is nevertheless pressing its distribution centre workers to accept a further erosion of their conditions and low wages. The company has reportedly offered a 3 percent pay rise—half that being demanded by the striking workers—but even this is conditional on the elimination of existing entitlements including penalty rates and shift loading. The NUW has said this could result in the wages of some workers being slashed by up to \$324 a week.

Full-time workers at the Broadmeadows distribution centre earn up to \$53,000 per year. In a revealing statement illustrating the exploitation of workers across the retail sector, Woolworths claimed that the striking workers are the best paid in its distribution centres nationally. Workers in each Woolworths warehouse are employed on separate EBAs. They are in fact directly employed not by the retail giant but by one of its various subsidiaries—employees at the Broadmeadows centre are hired by one called Queensland Property Investments Pty Ltd.

Workers on the Broadmeadows picket line who spoke with the WSWs on the weekend bitterly complained about the frequency of injuries caused by the heavy lifting involved in their work. The centre moves tens of thousands of freight cartons per day. In a typical 10-hour shift, workers are authorised to take an unpaid meal break of half an hour and two

shorter breaks. Workers said that if any of them were injured, the company was ruthless in challenging compensation claims. The conditions resulted in large number of casual workers quitting after a short period.

One picketing worker who asked not to be identified told the WSWS that the centre's management also enforce punitive regulations, including preventing "excessive talking" between colleagues—longer than ten seconds—by shifting them to different areas of the warehouse.

When negotiations for the new EBA began last August, Woolworths management demanded new work arrangements, extending day shifts from the present 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. to between 5 a.m. and 7 p.m. It also hopes to extend the number of part-time and casual four-hour shifts so as to avoid having to provide meal breaks, and abolish the existing 10-minute rest break on these four hour shifts. In addition, Woolworths has refused to agree to workers' demand that the number of casual employees be limited to one per every ten permanent workers.

The Woolworths distribution centre workers are locked in a struggle not only with the retail giant but with the state and federal Labor governments and the NUW.

Premier John Brumby's state government has a ruthless record in acting on behalf of big business and finance capital in suppressing any action taken by workers in defence of their wages and conditions. Last year the government deployed riot police to the West Gate Bridge construction project to break up a picket in defence of jobs. This was followed a series of prosecutions that resulted in workers being convicted of serious criminal charges and hit with massive fines. All this proceeded under the banner of the federal Labor government's Fair Work regime.

Brumby has so far remained silent on the Woolworths struggle—despite it occurring in his own electorate of Broadmeadows and at the beginning of the campaign for the November 27 state election. There is no question that the premier is monitoring the situation very closely, and that preparations are in place to respond with repressive measures as necessary. The immediate deployment of police to the Woolworths' warehouse on Saturday morning, and the intervention of the Supreme Court the same day, provide a mere foretaste of what is being prepared.

Workers can only advance their struggle by issuing the widest possible public appeal and by reaching out and mobilising other workers in the retail and transport industries as well as all those being confronted with attacks on pay and conditions in Australia and internationally. Rank and file committees ought to be formed, independent of and in opposition to the NUW.

The union has only agreed to the industrial action under enormous pressure from the Broadmeadows employees—last year a large number resigned from the union in disgust with its record.

The union's interests are diametrically opposed to those of the workers. The NUW bureaucracy's concern is to maintain its privileges by enforcing the existing system of wages and conditions on behalf of Woolworths and other employers. Like other trade unions, the NUW's resources are now largely divorced from membership dues; senior bureaucrats sit alongside corporate executives on the board of the \$2.5 billion superannuation fund, the Labor Union Co-operative Retirement Fund (LUCRF). One of the demands listed in the union's log of claims is that LUCRF be listed as the default superannuation fund for compulsory contributions of Woolworths' warehouse employees—thereby increasing the pool of members' financial assets it controls.

Above all, what is required is a new political perspective. The starting point must be the recognition that amid the greatest economic crisis since the 1930s, workers' jobs and living standards can be protected only on the basis of an independent struggle against the capitalist system itself, a system that is based on the exploitation of the working class in the interests of private profit. Humanity's productive forces can no longer remain subordinated to the interests of a narrow ultra-wealthy layer and must instead be consciously directed towards meeting working people's complex social needs in Australia and internationally.

This is the socialist perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party and our candidate for Broadmeadows in the upcoming state election, Peter Byrne. We urge all Woolworths' workers to contact the SEP, read our election statement "Support the socialist alternative in the Victorian state election", and support our campaign.

Click here for the coverage of the SEP Victorian election campaign

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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