

Striking warehouse workers isolated as trade unions prepare sell out deal

Patrick O'Connor
4 November 2010

Around 600 workers in a distribution warehouse operated by supermarket giant Woolworths in the northern Melbourne suburb of Broadmeadows have been on strike for six days in defence of improved wages and conditions. Their determined and principled stand, however, is now in serious danger. The National Union of Workers (NUW) has consciously isolated the workers, preventing fellow warehouse workers from joining the struggle and ensuring that Woolworths' supply chain remains unaffected by the action in Broadmeadows. Meanwhile, the union is continuing its negotiations with management.

Approximately 200 full-time, 250 part-time, and 160 casual workers are involved in the dispute. They 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.

Following discussions with the NUW, Woolworths' management announced last Tuesday that it would offer a 3.4 percent annual pay increase for levels 2 to 5, but 0 percent for level 1 employees. This is from a current salary at just \$53,000 for the most experienced full-time employees. Moreover, the official consumer price index stands at 2.8 percent, though the real cost of living increases in areas including housing, electricity and gas, water, groceries, and other necessities is far higher. As one striker told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "My electricity bill has jumped from \$250 to \$480. What is going to happen in ten years? People will have to take out a loan just to pay for their food. I can see myself having to work at least until I'm 65."

Woolworths is also insisting on an extension to the regular span of hours, with the current 6 p.m. finish to change to 8 p.m. This is one of several proposals aimed at reducing the level of overtime and penalty rates paid. Another means casual workers will be stripped of their overtime clause and paid at day shift rates up to 8 p.m., and afternoon shift penalties will apply only after 12.30 a.m.

These measures are expected to leave many workers, especially casuals, between \$200 and \$300 a week worse off. They have been recommended by the NUW to its members as a basis for discussion and agreement, sparking widespread anger and opposition. Several workers denounced the union on a Facebook web page created as part of the industrial campaign. "This is bullshit!" one wrote. "Casuals get screwed... [if] this goes through I'm quitting the union!" Another said: "Dayshift extended by 2 hours, what a joke. And of course the only ones affected are the casuals, those that work 4 p.m. – 12 a.m.

cop it hard. Who is the union supporting here!!!!!"

The union is in fact supporting its own interests in league with management against the striking workers. Woolworths is determined to boost its massive profits even further, after posting a record \$2 billion last year. Right across the retail and distribution industry there is a drive to tear up existing conditions and reduce wages. One striking Broadmeadows worker told the WSWS he believed the company's aim was to emulate its rival Coles, which reportedly operates its warehouses with an entirely casual labour force earning a standard rate of \$25 per hour around the clock, with no sick leave or holiday pay.

The clear strategy of both management and the NUW is to pit different sections of the Broadmeadows workforce against one another—targeting casuals in particular—in order to ram through a sell out agreement. The workers are being hung out to dry by the union. They are not being paid any strike pay, creating severe financial difficulties for many, especially those with children and mortgages.

As far as the union bureaucracy is concerned, this is a strike that has been designed to fail. The company wants to impose a significant defeat on these workers and then use it as a precedent to ram through the same attacks on its entire workforce, and the union has been fully complicit. It has kept the entire struggle within the framework of the federal Labor government's draconian Fair Work Australia industrial relations regime, refusing to call out on strike its membership in other warehouses. Similarly, a spokesman for the Victorian branch of the Transport Workers Union, John Halloran, confirmed to the *Supply Chain Review* magazine that TWU members would continue to cross picket lines. Woolworths was provided with advanced notice of the strike and has simply stepped up operations in its other warehouses to pick up the slack.

From the very outset of the dispute, management and the union have relied on the state. Just hours after the strike began at midnight last Friday night, police were at the picket line escorting trucks across. Then the Supreme Court issued an injunction against halting trucks and against preventing people crossing the line at Broadmeadows. When about 200 workers and their families responded last Sunday by driving to another major distribution centre in the outer western suburb of Laverton, briefly slowing deliveries there, Woolworths simply returned to court and was granted another injunction forbidding such action at all of its warehouses in Victoria.

The WSWs today spoke with a store person in the Woolworth's Laverton warehouse who was working when the strikers arrived to picket outside. "They [the workers] are trying to get something from the company—what we are doing by staying at work is taking their jobs by doing overtime and finishing their work," he said "Why can't any NUW official come to us and explain what is going on in Broadmeadows and at least ask us not to do overtime during the week?"

The worker spoke about the unsafe working conditions endured by Woolworths' employees: "Some of the boxes we lift have printed on them that they must be lifted by two persons; they weigh up to 17, 18 kilograms. They have a warning on the box that they have to be lifted by two people, but we have to do the lifting by ourselves. I am especially worried about the young people—they are advertising for the summer season to get students to come and work. I am not happy about how they are training these young people, after one week they put them in to lift boxes of liquor for 10 hours a day, four days per week... At the moment there are between 40 to 50 people who are on light duties [due to injury] and are waiting to return to normal work."

Workers at the Broadmeadows distribution centre have also spoken with the WSWs about safety concerns. One said that when an injury occurs the employee is typically assigned to lighter duties for three or four days as a means of covering up formally reported injury rates. Workers have repeatedly called in the WorkSafe Victoria regulator, but as one put it, "It's like they were owned by the company", and little action is taken. The warehouse is not properly organised to allow for safe lifting within a range between the shoulders and knees, and there are areas in which the only way that boxes can be lifted is by bending and twisting. Management enforces an exhausting rate of 450 – 600 boxes shifted an hour.

There is nothing in the current enterprise bargaining agreement stipulating the "pick rate" (boxes shifted per hour), and this and other safety issues have not been raised by the NUW as part of negotiations for the new three-year EBA.

The Broadmeadows Woolworths workers have taken an important stand in defence of wages and conditions, and have demonstrated their determination to fight. Yesterday about 80 strikers marched through central Melbourne and received a warm response as they told passers-by about their struggle. The NUW, however, issued no prior notification of the rally to other sections of workers and channelled the workers' appeal to the wider public behind the utterly futile call for a consumer boycott of Woolworths' supermarkets.

The trade unions function as industrial police on behalf of big business, enforcing productivity speedups, job cuts, and the suppression of wages. In return they receive a lucrative flow of members' dues and financial assets via multi-billion dollar industry superannuation funds, on which union bureaucrats serve as directors alongside senior corporate executives. This is an international phenomenon—in Europe, the US, and elsewhere the trade unions are consciously sabotaging any resistance to the offensive now being waged against the social position of the working class.

Workers at the Broadmeadows distribution centre must break with the NUW and organise a rank and file committee, with trusted

workers elected as leading representatives. The first necessary step is to coordinate industrial action with workers in Woolworths' other distribution centres, in Victoria and nationally. The company's regular supply operations cannot be permitted to continue any longer! At the same time, Woolworths workers must turn out for support to other sections of the working class facing similar attacks on their living standards and working conditions.

This campaign must be guided by an independent political perspective. In seeking to defend their interests, the Broadmeadows warehouse workers are confronted with state and federal Labor governments and their antidemocratic, pro-business industrial laws. The strike has erupted in the first week of the official campaign for the Victorian election on November 27. There is no doubt that the office of Labor Premier John Brumby is closely monitoring the industrial dispute, which has broken out in his own electorate, preparing to intervene in the event that the NUW fails to keep matters under control. Last year the state government deployed riot police to the West Gate Bridge construction project to break up a picket in defence of jobs.

To defend their most basic interests, workers must make a conscious break with the Labor Party and turn to a socialist alternative. The Socialist Equality Party, and Peter Byrne, our candidate for Broadmeadows in the upcoming state election, insist that a secure and safe job on a decent living wage must be a fundamental right for everyone. This requires, however, the complete reorganisation of the Australian and world economy, so that the wealth created by the working class is used to satisfy the social needs of all. It means a direct confrontation with the agenda and priorities of global finance capital and with the capitalist profit system itself.

We urge all Woolworths' workers to contact the SEP, read our election statement "Support the socialist alternative in the Victorian state election", and participate in our campaign.

Click here for the coverage of the SEP Victorian election campaign
Authorised by Nick Beams, 113/55 Flemington Rd, North Melbourne 3051

The author recommends:
Warehouse workers strike over wages and conditions
[1 November 2010]

Australia: Support the socialist alternative in the Victorian state election
[25 October 2010]



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact