Australia: Union rams through sellout deal for warehouse workers

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About 600 workers at a Woolworths' operated distribution warehouse in Broadmeadows, Melbourne have ended their six-day strike and picket today, after the National Union of Workers (NUW) rammed through a new three-year enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) yesterday afternoon. As a result of the sellout deal, many of the casual workers will lose several hours of overtime payments and receive substantially lower wages. None of the workers' central demands—including a 6 percent annual pay rise, a 10 to 1 permanent to casual staff ratio, and improved work shift and break times—was met.

The agreement struck between the NUW and Woolworths' management was approved at a mass meeting of striking workers yesterday. From the outset of the meeting, the union bureaucracy presented the new working arrangements as a fait accompli. Workers were repeatedly told "this is as good as it gets". The vote was preceded by one official asking "Do you want to stay out at the gate [picketing]?"—a difficult prospect for many workers given that the NUW paid none of them any strike pay for the six days they were out, and failed to secure any back pay from Woolworths covering their industrial action. In the end, a reported 88 percent voted in favour of the agreement, with 12 percent against.

The Woolworths' struggle and its betrayal by the NUW underscores the urgent need for the development of an independent political movement of the working class that is based on a conscious struggle against the pro-capitalist agenda of the trade unions and the government, which is aimed at slashing wages, jobs and working conditions in the interests of the financial markets and corporate elite.

Behind the final vote of the Broadmeadows warehouse workers on the union-management deal there exists widespread anger and opposition. Several left yesterday's meeting before the vote was taken, with one group summing up the union's position as, "F*** the casuals!"

Under the new EBA, the span of regular work hours is extended from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. In addition, casuals will be paid at day shift rates throughout this period, losing as much as four to five hours of extra afternoon shift pay loading. This amounts to a substantial wage cut, of as much as $200 to $300 per week for many of the 160 casual workers who participated in the strike. A significant number of whom work the equivalent of full-time hours and have been at the Woolworth's distribution centre for as long as seven years without being offered a permanent position, which brings with it sick pay, leave provisions, and superannuation contributions.

One casual worker, who asked not to be identified, yesterday told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "You will have to work extra hours to earn what you earned before. I have worked 26-30 hours a week to earn about $1,000, but now I will have to work 38 hours to make the same amount. I think we've been sold out."

The NUW consciously pitted the different sections of the Broadmeadows workforce against one another. Casuals were targeted as a means of providing Woolworths with a reduced wages bill—but there is no enthusiasm among any layer of the workers for the new EBA.

Under its terms, permanent workers will receive a 3.4 percent annual wage increase. This is insufficient to cover escalating costs of living—let alone to deliver a decent living wage. Even the most experienced workers, who engage in daily heavy lifting and stressful activity, only earn up to $53,000 a year. As well as the two-hour extension of the regular work span, permanent workers

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are also affected by a 30 minute extension of the afternoon shift from midnight to 12.30 a.m., which will see workers either having to remain at the warehouse later into the night, or, if they are already working such hours, missing out on half an hour of night shift penalty loading. In a pathetic one-off sop, Woolworths granted a $300 gift card to each worker for use at its supermarkets.

The NUW has promoted the new arrangements for dividing up shifts and hours worked. The essential content of these measures, however, is to entrench the bureaucracy's relationship with Woolworths. No confidence can be placed in the proposed "one off review" offering full-time positions to those part-time workers currently doing an average of 32 hours or more, nor in the quarterly meetings between management and delegates to "discuss minimum manning levels". The final agreement says nothing about the workers' demand of a ratio of one casual for every ten permanent workers—the issue was simply buried by the union.

From the outset, the NUW consciously isolated the Broadmeadows workers. Staff at other Woolworths' distribution centres were not asked to support the strike, permitting the retail giant to continue its supermarket supply operations as usual. No other section of the working class was alerted to what was happening, let alone any solidarity actions organised. The deliberate strategy was one of allowing the workers to blow off steam in the first days of the strike, while sowing discouragement and frustration in order to subsequently ram though the rotten agreement.

What has been demonstrated, yet again, in the Woolworths' dispute is that the trade unions in Australia and internationally have material interests that are directly contrary to those of the working class. Throughout the world they have spent the past three decades offering their services to employers and the state to help boost corporate profits and " international competitiveness" by enforcing mass job cuts, productivity speed ups, and wage cuts.

In Australia, the unions have a direct financial interest in such measures through their control of multi-billion dollar industry superannuation funds. NUW bureaucrats, for example, sit alongside corporate executives on the $2.5 billion Labor Union Co-operative Retirement Fund (LUCRF). Media reports last year revealed that one of these executives was Ted Eftimiadis, the employee relations manager at Pacific Brands. When Pacific Brands sacked more than 1,800 workers, Eftimiadis's fellow board member, NUW national secretary Charlie Donnelly, said—and did—nothing, despite many of the 1,800 sacked workers being NUW members.

The Woolworths' dispute must sound a warning to every worker that, for all the media's promotion of Australian exceptionalism, the coordinated austerity agenda being unleashed by governments and corporations in Europe, the United States and elsewhere is also underway here.

Working people can only defend their interests by breaking decisively with the trade unions, forming new organisations of struggle, including workplace rank and file committees, and turning out to unite with other sections of workers in Australia and internationally. Above all what is required is a break from the nationalist "free market" program of the Labor Party and trade unions, and the building of a new mass party of the working class based on a socialist and internationalist perspective. The purpose of the Socialist Equality Party's election campaign now underway in Broadmeadows is precisely to lay the political basis for the development of such a movement.

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

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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