

Australian meat workers locked out in dispute over wages and conditions

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More than 140 cold storage workers in the western Melbourne suburb of Brooklyn have maintained a 24-hour picket outside their meat processing plant since being locked out on December 3 by the Brazilian multinational company, JBS Swift. The company's lockout—authorised under the Gillard government's industrial relations Fair Work Australia (FWA) regime—is part of a wider offensive against the working class in Australia and internationally involving the use of police and other state agencies.

Police have been deployed to the Swift picket to monitor the situation and ensure that deliveries and production remain unaffected. They are no doubt prepared to carry out mass arrests like those made in the past week at the Visy packaging plant in Dandenong, on the other side of Melbourne. More than 70 Visy workers were charged with “besetting a premises” and obstruction—charges that carry up to three months' imprisonment. As in the Visy dispute, the trade unions are deliberately isolating the workers in order to prepare a sell-out deal with management and prevent any struggle emerging outside the framework of the Labor government's FWA laws.

The lockout began when the workers, who are covered by the National Union of Workers (NUW), rejected the company's proposed new enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) and voted to take industrial action. JBS Swift is demanding a wage adjustment of 2 percent a year over two years—a real wage cut, given that annual cost-of-living increases are well above this. The company is also demanding changes to rostering that would see shifts increase from 8 hours to between 9.5 and 12.6 hours, implemented at the company's discretion on any day of the week, including Saturday and Sunday. This is aimed at slashing wages by eliminating workers' overtime and weekend penalty rates. The workers are demanding that the new EBA include no changes to their penalty rates

and working times, and an annual wage increase of 4 percent.

Swift initially responded to the workers' rejection of its proposed EBA by flying in a senior manager from Queensland to intimidate individual workers—many of whom are immigrants who don't speak English—into accepting the proposed agreement. When this failed, the workers were locked out, leaving them and their families in a dire financial situation leading up to Christmas.

Throughout the dispute, the NUW has insisted that the workers accept the constraints of Labor's anti-democratic industrial laws. No workers in the meat industry, or those covered by the NUW in other sectors, have been mobilised in defence of the Swift workers. The union has also raised the threat of court action and fines if any trucks or individuals are barred from entering the premises by picketers. Swift has brought its own trucks in from Queensland and utilised scab contract labour in its cold stores. As a result, production inside the plant has continued unabated.

Hundreds of other permanent workers are still working at the plant. Their union, the Australian Meat Industry Employees Union (AMIEU), has instructed its members not to support the locked-out workers, insisting that any action would be classified as a “secondary boycott”, leading to legal action, including fines against individual workers.

Swift is trying to bring its Brooklyn cold storage operations into line with changes already rammed through at its 15 other meat processing and feed lots in Australia. Other sections of the workforce in the Brooklyn plant are already subjected to shifts of between 9.5 and 12 hours, as a result of EBAs imposed last year.

Restructuring measures imposed by the company have seen hundreds of workers laid off in recent months, including 430 from plants in Dinmore and Townsville in Queensland, and 90 at Longford in Tasmania. Last week

the company announced that 80 jobs in Cobram, Victoria, half the workforce, are to be eliminated. On December 9, it was reported that Swift had broken off negotiations for a new workplace agreement with workers at its meat processing plant on King Island, near Tasmania. Union officials claim that the company is pressing for lower pay and worse conditions.

The AMIEU has collaborated with Swift in suppressing any resistance to the company's sweeping reorganisation of working conditions. The NUW is now preparing to do likewise at Brooklyn's cold storage facilities. Just last month the NUW sold out a struggle of about 600 Woolworths' warehouse workers who struck for a week to demand better wages and conditions. The union then met the company's demand for a lower wages bill by agreeing to various shift and overtime changes that left casual employees up to \$300 a week worse off.

In the Swift dispute, the union has sought to cover up the scope of the company's nation-wide offensive by trying to blame the ferocity of the operation on the recently elected Victorian Liberal government. On December 10, bureaucrats promoted the new state Labor Party leader, Daniel Andrews, and shadow attorney general, Martin Pakula, when they visited the picket. Both were leading members of the defeated Brumby state Labor government, which orchestrated a series of provocative attacks on sections of workers, including the West Gate Bridge construction workers last year.

The unusual occurrence of a state Labor leader appearing on a picket reflects broader concerns within the political establishment over the Swift dispute's potential to escalate further and spill out of the control of the unions.

The Swift workers' struggle is now at an important stage. Having demonstrated their determination to fight in defence of their wages, jobs and conditions, they are confronted with the urgent necessity to organise independently of the trade unions, which are isolating the dispute and preparing betrayal.

The first step in this process involves the formation of a rank-and-file committee that fights to win active support for Swift workers throughout the meat industry in Australia and internationally. Above all what is required is a new political perspective. Workers must make a conscious break with the Labor Party and fight to build a new independent mass party of the working class, based on an internationalist and socialist program.

Locked-out workers recently spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site*.

David Dyson explained: "Here they follow you to the toilet and threaten you with the sack. They try to set you up. They get new bosses in. One foreman stands there all day, doing nothing and gets paid \$85,000. He does nothing but intimidate us. I've been driving a fork lift for 35 years. He'll follow you and threaten that he'll put you back on the floor. They have gone through about 800 workers in six or seven years. They sack people or put them off—only so many written warnings and you're out the door.

"With the company offer, they say you may be working a three-day shift. A lot of people with families can't work 12.6 hours. They need to go home after eight hours. Also, you're on the roster. You don't know when you're working. You could end up on a Saturday without penalty rates. Anybody rostered on a Saturday will only get ordinary rates. Only in some circumstances, where workers are called in especially, will they get penalty rates, and they would only get time and a half, not double time. This is a lot of stress on young couples.

"We have different nationalities here—they are all good people and they have all stuck together. I've got two sons. My father fought for me. It makes you think what our kids are going to face. I've been waiting for this day for 13 years. They locked us out. They made the first move."

Another worker, who did not want to be named, said: "If they beat us here, they will do the same to the rest of the meat workers. It is a problem having different unions on the site. The meat workers can't do anything [to help us] with these laws ... We threatened indefinite strike. They turned round and locked us out. They have offered 2 percent. If you're working 12.6 hours with no overtime, this is a very small increase. They are taking away our penalty rates and our RDOs [rostered days off].

"The picket is having some effect. Most Victorian drivers will not cross the picket. But they are bringing trucks in from Queensland with livestock. They are not stopping. They are bringing in their own prime movers, drivers and trucks."



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