# A reply to the falsifications of the ACTU and pseudo-lefts on the Swift meatworkers' struggle

**Peter Byrne, SEP candidate for Broadmeadows**
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Ged Kearney, president of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), last month oversaw the imposition of a disgraceful sell-out deal on Melbourne meatworkers, who had been locked out for nearly six weeks. She has now penned an extraordinary article falsifying what actually happened and promoting the outcome as a tremendous victory, secured by trade union "solidarity". The very same position has been advanced by various pseudo-socialist organisations. The entire episode serves as another demonstration of the contempt and hostility of the unions and middle class ex-left outfits for the working class.

On December 3, at a large meat-processing plant in the suburb of Brooklyn, operated by Brazilian-based multinational JBS Swift, management locked out 140 cold storage workers. The sudden action was punishment for the workers' refusal to accept the company's demand for a new enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA), involving a nominal pay rise of just 2 percent a year, an extension of shift times from 8 hours to between 9.5 and 12.6 hours, and the effective abolition of weekend penalty rates. The predominantly immigrant cold storage workers, who earn a base wage rate of between just $17.48 and $21.66 an hour, demanded a pay rise of at least 4 percent a year, with no erosion of shift and overtime arrangements.

The National Union of Workers (NUW), which covers the cold storage workers at the plant, responded to the lock out by deliberately isolating the workers for weeks. At the same time as the meatworkers were maintaining a 24-hour picket outside the plant, a struggle erupted at Visy packaging factories in Melbourne and Sydney, which culminated in a highly provocative police attack and mass arrest of picketing workers in the Melbourne suburb of Dandenong. While this amounted to a sharp warning to the Swift workers, whose picket was under close supervision by police—the unions ensured there no contact or discussion between the Visy and Swift workforces, let alone any development of a unified struggle.

The NUW instructed the Swift workers not to interfere with the company's scab labour force and delivery trucks, which were crossing their picket line. The union insisted that any "interference" would be unlawful under the Labor's government industrial laws, underscoring its position that no challenge could be mounted to Prime Minister Julia Gillard's Fair Work Australia regime. Meanwhile, the rest of the 980-member workforce at the Brooklyn plant, members of the Australian Meat Industry Employees Union, were instructed by the unions not to take any action in support of their locked-out colleagues. In another conscious move to wear down and demoralise the cold storage workers, the NUW provided no strike pay—just three token payments of $250 for the entire six week struggle, including the Christmas holiday period. Many workers were forced to quit the picket and look for other employment, while others had to sell their personal possessions to survive and were threatened with eviction and foreclosure.

After five-and-a-half weeks, Ged Kearney and a legion of union bureaucrats staged a phony "community picket". Ostensibly a demonstration of solidarity, the event was a conscious diversion—a cover for the NUW's final preparation of its betrayal of the locked out workers. The union agreed with the company's demand for a 2 percent nominal wage rise—in reality a real wage cut, given that the official cost of living rate is now 4.6 percent. Moreover, it agreed to new shift time and overtime arrangements, also aimed at reducing Swift's wages bill. Under the return to work terms, "the company may choose to introduce 9.5 hour shifts by volunteers only or new starters". A 9.5 hour "voluntary" shift on Saturdays would be paid at just time and a half, not double time as previously. The new EBA, in other words, marked a further deterioration of the cold storage workers' pay and conditions.

Just over half of all the locked out workers voted on the deal, with 50 in favour of returning to work and 21 opposed.

Ged Kearney's article, "It's times like these that make us pull together"—published in various union publications, including on the NUW website—cynically raised the Swift struggle as part of a mawkish reflection on the value of trade unionism. "Watching the devastation on TV [in the Queensland floods] and hearing of the loss, bravery, and sadness one can't help but re-evaluate priorities," she declared. Referring to her children, she continued: "I can help build a society that just might protect them a little better; that just might be a bit more equal, more just, more fair than had we, the movement, not been here."

Describing the initial "insulting" demands raised by JBS Swift, Kearney referred to "reduced hours" and "the introduction of 'voluntary' overtime at normal rates", to "name a few offensive items on the list". The ACTU president made no mention of the fact that some of these "offensive items" were agreed by the NUW in only

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slightly modified form. “Voluntary” overtime work is now in place, for example, with Saturday penalty rates reduced by half. Moreover, Kearney chose not to include in her list of “offensive items” the company’s demand for a real wage cut, no doubt because the unions agreed to this particular measure without modification.

Describing her time on the “community picket”, Kearney offensively portrayed herself as the saviour of the Swift workers. “When I got there I heard they were about to give up,” she writes. “Five weeks with no pay, families and mortgages to support, the determination was dwindling... The crowd of union supporters from about a dozen unions not only swelled the numbers at the line, but swelled the energy, enthusiasm and dignity of the locked out workers. I have never seen such a transformation from a group of tired worn down union members about to give in, to a group of energised fighters, ready to stand another 5 weeks if necessary.”

Unsurprisingly, the ACTU chief made no mention of the union’s refusal to issue any strike pay over the course of the struggle. Kearney clearly did not want to have to try to explain why the unions—which have multi-billion dollar investments in superannuation funds, lucrative property and other assets—did nothing to prevent a group of low-wage locked out workers from plunging deeper into poverty and debt over the course of their struggle.

Kearney’s claim that the belated appearance of a group of union bureaucrats on the picket line swelled the workers’ “energy, enthusiasm and dignity” is false. Their presence was in fact greeted with considerable scepticism among numbers of workers. “Something should have been done ages ago,” one told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “We were out all of December.”

The ACTU president continued: “The company caved in by the way, at such a show of strength over just two days, and the workers went back to work with a better deal. They have decent work, decent working conditions, and importantly their dignity, thanks to their union and the broader movement. That is what I want for my kids as they enter the world of work and it gave me great satisfaction to think that in a small way I can contribute to that as a union member, as a union leader.”

Such shamefaced lying ultimately reflects the trade unions’ hostility towards the working class. Kearney and her fellow union bureaucrats comprise an affluent, middle-class social layer. Like its counterparts internationally, the bureaucracy’s privileges derive from its function as an industrial police force, helping big business impose lower wages and productivity speed-ups, and suppressing any resistance to large-scale layoffs. Such measures have been ratcheted up since the eruption of the global economic crisis in 2008, with the Swift sell out only one of many recent union betrayals.

To successfully defend their jobs, wages, and condition, workers must make a determined political break with the trade unions, and build their own independent organisations such as factory and workplace rank-and-file committees. Such initiatives must be consciously directed at establishing the political independence of the working class through the construction of a new revolutionary party fighting for a socialist and internationalist program—the Socialist Equality Party.

The various middle class pseudo-socialist groups are bitterly opposed to this perspective. They do everything in their power to corral workers behind the trade unions and the Labor Party. This was once again demonstrated in the response of the misnamed organisations Socialist Alliance and Workers Solidarity Network (WSN) to the Swift sell-out. Like the ACTU, both misrepresented what happened and hailed the return to work as a victory.

WSN is operated by Emma Kerin (daughter of former “radical” and Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union official Dave Kerin), and functions as an adjunct to the union bureaucracy, frequently intervening on its behalf at pickets and lock-outs. In an article titled “Cold store workers emerge victorious”, the group falsely claimed that Swift workers “have held onto the eight-hour working day and their penalty rates” and concluded, “From a somewhat despondent lockout to a bold and very public victory, this dispute is an amazing example of the power of solidarity.”

The Socialist Alliance’s newspaper *Green Left Weekly* published an article on January 23 titled “Swift meatworkers beat lockout”. Unsurprisingly, the piece quoted none of the workers themselves, and was instead largely comprised of two interviews with WSN’s Emma Kerin and NUW organiser Darren Stiles. “It was a very good result,” Stiles declared. “Ninety percent of our members are happy. The other 10 percent wanted to keep on giving them [the company] a kicking. We did what the rest of the site couldn’t do. We kept our penalty rates. We kept our eight-hour day. We kept our rostered days off. We got a two year agreement with a 3 percent wage increase per annum, backdated to August.”

Nearly every part of this quote is untrue. Far from 90 percent of the workers being “happy”, only half of those locked out voted on the agreement, and of those, 30 percent were opposed; penalty rates on Saturday were halved for “volunteers”; the eight-hour day was scrapped in favour of a 9.5 hour day for new hires and for “volunteers”; and the wage increase was just 2 percent a year, not 3 percent.

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*The author recommends:*

The socialist alternative in the Broadmeadows by-election
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