Australia: Striking process workers resist police attacks

Our reporters
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Workers at a chicken processing plant operated by Baiada Poultry in Melbourne's western suburbs have been on strike since November 9, demanding higher wages, safer working conditions and an end to the ruthless exploitation of casual and contract employees.

More than 200 workers covered by the National Union of Workers (NUW), mostly female immigrants from Vietnam, have maintained a picket outside the plant. Last Friday night they were brutally attacked by about 80 police, who attempted to escort a busload of strike breakers into the plant. Several workers were assaulted and punched in the face. One worker, 46-year-old Phong Nguyen, had to be hospitalised after police trampled on his legs as he sat on the ground. The police finally backed off without gaining entrance.

The police operation followed another provocation the day before, when a security guard sought to drive through the crowd outside the plant and injured a worker. Picketers stopped the driver before he could injure others, forcibly removing the keys from the ignition. This was immediately condemned as an act of "violence" by the media and both Labor and Liberal politicians, who unsurprisingly said nothing about the police assault.

Chris Evans, the federal Labor government's workplace relations minister, seized the opportunity to slander the striking workers. "We don't tolerate violence in industrial disputation in Australia," he declared. "People have a right to strike in Australia, employers have [a right] to a lockout, but people don't have a right to violence as part of those disputes."

Richard Dalla-Riva, industrial relations minister in the state Liberal government in Victoria, also weighed in, demanding that "violence and lawlessness, including intimidation of other workers, should be condemned by employers and unions alike."

Baiada Poultry is the largest chicken processor in Australia, with farms and plants employing 2,200 workers. The privately-owned company controls about 35 percent of the poultry market, supplying the major supermarket chains and fast food outlets. Last year, Baiada had revenues of nearly $1.2 billion. *Business Review Weekly* this year estimated the personal wealth of the Baiada family at $495 million.

Baiada's plant in Laverton North, where the strike is taking place, employs about 430 workers. About 40 percent are employed as labour hire workers, contractors or cash in hand workers. Many are international students and are paid as little as $10 an hour—under the minimum wage—and forced to work shifts as long as 17-20 hours. Only 284 workers are permanent.

The NUW is negotiating a new enterprise bargaining agreement covering these workers. Baiada is attempting to ram through a real wage cut on the already poorly-paid workers, offering 3 percent annual pay increases, less than the rising cost of living. The company also wants to eliminate all overtime pay and extra payments for working on public holidays and weekends.

Workers are demanding 5 percent annual pay rises and an end to the exploitation of cash-in-hand and casual labour. The strike was also provoked by the appalling and dangerous conditions workers face. Last year at the North Laverton plant, an Indian student, Sarel Singh, was working as a cleaner and was decapitated after being forced to clean a fast moving poultry line. One of the workers' chants on the picket line has been, "Sarel Singh, here present."

One worker told the WSWS: "We don't have safety here. That is why Sarel Singh died. They should put safety guards all around the machines. Still there is nothing."

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Another employee from the warehouse explained: “There is no job security. There are many contractors from a different company working in here. Some of them are international students and they are desperate for the money. They might work 20 hours straight without a break. We can’t do that; we have families to look after.”

A worker added: “The line reaches speeds of 200 birds per minute. This is a lot. It is a struggle to keep up. Three years ago it was 150 to 160 birds per minute before they started the contractors... There are a lot of injuries with shoulders and arms. Some people have had surgery. If we complain, nobody listens. There is no safety. Before, a job done by two or three people is now done by one person. They’re getting rid of full-time workers... We earn about $640 per week after tax—about $20 per hour. We have mortgages and families.”

An immigrant worker from a different meat plant joined the picket in support of friends who worked for Baiada. “Accidents are happening there all the time,” he said. “One worker on the cutting line had a chicken fall on his head off the hook—that is a 4 or 5 kilogram weight. Falling from a height with the force of gravity, it is very dangerous. One lady on the picket line the other day, had bruises on her face. It was caused by a chicken falling when she was packing boxes.”

The worker expressed his opposition to the role being played by the NUW, and referred to the union’s role in selling out a struggle waged nearly a year ago by cold storage meat workers at a plant operated by Brazilian transnational JBS Swift. The workers were locked out by the company for six weeks over the 2010-2011 Christmas and New Year period.

Isolated by the union bureaucracy, the impoverished Swift workers were not issued any strike pay, forcing many to take out loans and sell personal possessions just to survive. In the end, the unions staged a bogus “community picket” as it was about to sell out the dispute—dozens of “left” union officials suddenly appeared, together with Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) President Ged Kearney. The NUW then rammed through an agreement that delivered on the company’s key demands, including a real wage cut, the elimination of the eight-hour day and erosion of weekend overtime penalty rates. (See “National Union of Workers sells out six-week Swift meatworkers’ struggle”)

“The Baiada workers are in the middle between the union and management,” the meat worker told the WSWS. “The workers are getting used by both sides. The workers need to learn from what happened at Swift meats, where the strike lasted for six weeks and the workers were defeated, even though the union said it was a victory... There are other Baiada factories, and they are not on strike. What the union is doing at Baiada is definitely politics.”

The NUW’s aim is not to abolish the appalling working conditions in the poultry plant, or win decent wages for the workers there, but rather to extend its coverage to those employees now working on a casual or informal basis, collecting more dues and entrenching its position in Baiada. The union bureaucracy—which has presided over the deterioration of working conditions in Baiada and other meat and poultry plants—constitutes a privileged upper-middle class layer who collaborate with management to suppress labour costs and boost productivity throughout the industry.

Baiada workers must draw some sharp lessons from the Swift dispute. As at Swift, the unions have formed a “community picket” dominated by their officials, though the state Supreme Court issued an injunction forbidding NUW officials from being directly involved. ACTU President Kearney appeared before the workers last Sunday—a sure sign that a sell-out is being prepared behind the scenes.

Various pseudo-left organisations have rushed to back the union bureaucracy’s manoeuvres. In the Swift dispute, these outfits did their utmost to provide the unions with a “left” cover, hailing the final sell-out as a “victory.” Now at Baiada, they are preparing to play the same role. Corey Oakley, editor of *Socialist Alternative* magazine, declared that Kearney’s appearance at the picket “helps establish that the union movement as a whole is backing this strike.” In fact, it is a warning that the unions are about to betray the struggle.

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