

New Zealand meat workers lockout enters eighth week

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21 April 2012

Over 1,300 meat workers of the New Zealand processing company Affco held a five-day strike last week in support of 1,000 workers locked out from five plants since February 29 over a collective agreement dispute. On April 13, 300 meatworkers, along with families and supporters, marched through the Northland township of Moerewa to the local Affco plant. A second protest in Whanganui the following day attracted over 500 people.

The latest strike follows one over Easter, called after Affco announced that 480 workers would be locked out for the holiday weekend, in addition to those locked out since February. Meat Workers Union (MWU) officials said the Easter lockout was designed to save the company thousands of dollars in statutory holiday pay.

The MWU is seeking to dissipate the widespread support for the locked-out workers as it seeks a negotiated deal with the company to meet its demands. The union filed for facilitated bargaining with the Department of Labour after the company refused to attend mediation on Thursday. MWU chairman Dave Eastlake complained the mediation no-show proved the company was “unwilling to resolve this dispute and get our workers back to work.”

The lockouts and strikes involve workers in rural and provincial areas, including Moerewa, Horotiu, Rangiuru, Wairoa, Whanganui and Feilding. The company aims to smash up longstanding work practices and alter manning levels and tally rates on a shift-by-shift basis. Workers are covered by a core collective contract, with site agreements determining additional terms and conditions. Employment is seasonal, ranging from 2 to 11 months per year. Base pay rates are topped

up to between \$27 and \$31 per hour, according to the daily kill tally.

The company wants to dictate manning levels and tally rates so that it can manage each plant according to “changing circumstances.” In order to reduce the union’s ability to go to the Employment Court over interpretations of the contract, it is demanding a “clear, modern, flexible collective agreement that is not subject to continued legal challenges.”

Affco operations manager Rowan Ogg told the *New Zealand Herald* on April 7 that the central issue was one of “outdated and restrictive work practices.” Ogg singled out the seniority system which guarantees work in each new season to workers from the previous season in their order of hiring. Affco challenged this system at the start of the 2010-11 season by offering individual contracts paying 3 percent above the collective agreement. The union went to the Employment Court, which ruled that the collective agreement required Affco to adhere to seniority lists.

The current dispute initially began as a normal two-year wage negotiation, but the company issued its lockout notice after only 10 hours of talks and without any threat of strike action by workers. The notice individually named 760 union members to be locked out, but allowed about 900 others to keep working. A further 213 workers at Rangiuru were locked out later after they took part in a strike protesting the lockout.

After a wave of plant closures and mass sackings decimated the meat industry in the 1980s and 1990s, the Affco assault opens up a further round of restructuring. Affco is one of New Zealand’s biggest private companies. The Talley family took full

ownership of the previously farmer-owned Auckland Farmers' Freezing Co-operative 18 months ago. With a net worth estimated at \$NZ300 million, the Talleys have interests in meat, dairy, fish and horticulture. Their companies employ some 4,500 workers.

From the start, the MWU adapted to the company's position. The union agreed to the company's "right" to "manage the plant," while seeking to retain certain provisions in the agreement to determine "the large part" of wages by tally and manning numbers. The MWU also agreed to new procedures for settling disputes over the interpretation of the contract.

The MWU responded to the lockout with a limited industrial campaign that has enabled the management to keep plants operating with a mixture of union members who have been allowed to keep working and non-union workers on individual contracts. Ogg told the *Herald* that the management deliberately locked out only some union members to keep "a workable team" in all plants. A series of short strikes and training bans has been called by the MWU since the lockout began as a means of letting off steam.

Mediation between Affco and the MWU failed after Affco asked the Serious Fraud Office (SFO) to investigate the union's financial accounts. Affco alleged the union was not properly reporting where union fees were going. The SFO declined to investigate. The Employment Court has agreed to hear a union claim that the lockout is unlawful on April 23-24.

The lockouts are part of a wider employer offensive across major industries, including the Auckland waterfront. It signals a sharp shift by the business and political elite following last November's general election, which returned a right-wing coalition government led by Prime Minister John Key's National Party. A swathe of fresh austerity measures is being implemented in line with the global assault on jobs, living standards and public services.

A 65-day lockout of 110 meat workers at the CMP Rangitikei lamb and sheep plant before Christmas resulted in the MWU and the Council of Trade Unions

(CTU) agreeing to cuts to pay and conditions after the workers were worn down and virtually starved back to work. At the Ports of Auckland, the Maritime Union has called off a month-long strike in order to join management in talks with a government mediator over plans to sack nearly 300 workers and contract out their jobs. The NZ Nurses' Association and Service and Food Workers Union last week called off planned strike action over a new work agreement for 1,500 low-paid aged-care workers. The unions announced they would resume negotiations around a reduced pay demand, well below the rate of inflation.

The unions have worked to prevent any united struggle against this assault. They have insisted that workers accept the regressive provisions within the Employment Relations Act, which legalises lockouts as long as a collective employment agreement remains unsettled, while outlawing "secondary" stoppages by other workers. Each group of workers under attack has been kept isolated and worn down, allowing the unions time to sign deals and impose settlements. Labour, the Greens and the Mana Party have tacitly backed these betrayals, demanding "good faith bargaining" by both sides, while the various pseudo-left outfits have sought to keep workers corralled behind the unions.



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