

Coles warehouse strikers speak with Patrick O'Connor

Our reporters
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Patrick O'Connor, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) candidate in the July 21 Melbourne by-election, and SEP campaigners yesterday spoke with striking warehouse workers at a picket line in the northern suburb of Somerton.

The facility is one of the biggest warehousing sites in Australia, and serves as a national distribution centre for Coles, a supermarket giant. The 600 strikers are enforcing a 24-hour picket, blocking trucks entering the plant, in a conflict over a new three-year enterprise agreement.

The workers are members of the National Union of Workers (NUW). The union's log of claims includes a 5 percent annual pay rise, payment of shift loadings for the entirety of hours worked on afternoon and night shifts, and introduction of a rostered day off (RDO) for day shift. Other claims are for permanent positions to be offered to casual workers after several months of employment, a voluntary work system for public holidays and the protection of trade union rights.

The workers want the same wages and working conditions as other warehouse workers employed by Coles. The site at Somerton is outsourced to the Toll group, one of the leading logistics companies in the Asian region. The base wage rate offered by Toll is \$24.91 per hour, compared to about \$29 at other warehouses. Toll workers get no RDOs and no shift loadings for afternoon and night work.

Toll has rejected the demand for parity with other sites. Last night a spokesman said it was considering legal action against workers for "blockading" and "intimidation." A large contingent of security guards and at least 30-40 police officers are patrolling the picket. The *Age* reported today that Coles has applied to the federal Labor government's Fair Work tribunal to outlaw the strike, utilising the antidemocratic provisions of the industrial laws.

Yesterday a determined group of more than 300 workers

manned the picket. Ennis, originally from Bosnia, explained that most people hired to do the "pick" work—physically loading and unloading boxes that can each weigh 20 kilograms or more—lasted only about six months. "The company expects you to be working continuously, keep going, keep going. Most guys have to cut corners just to keep their rates up."

Gilbert previously worked at nearby South Pacific Tyres, before its plant was shut down in 2008. He spoke about the poor conditions at Toll. "We have nothing to give away [in productivity concessions]. For public holidays, for example, we're only guaranteed Christmas and Good Friday. Every other day we have to apply for, and if it's rejected because the company says you're needed, that's it, you're stuffed."

Ennis added: "It's all about profit, that's where we're going. They've given \$6 million to the Toll CEO, but now there's no money for us."

A small number of casuals in the warehouse are members of the NUW and are participating in the picket. One casual who had been working at the site for seven weeks said he would like to be permanent. "I was previously a permanent, at a small warehouse in Fitzroy, but I only got the award wage of \$16 an hour," he explained. "That just doesn't cut it when you have a three-year-old daughter, and rent and bills to pay... Here I get \$29 an hour."

The casual explained that on a typical shift, 30 casuals would begin work, then after four hours, the 10 workers with the lowest pick rates would be sent home. After another two hours, 5 more workers would have their shift terminated, so that only the 5 fastest casuals who began the shift would be given 8 hours work. "The company is also trying to cut the minimum shift length, so that we can be called in to work just three hours, down from four," he said.

The worker said he did not follow politics, but added that every politician "says one thing and does another." He said: "Look at [state Liberal Premier Ted] Baillieu. He promised to

make teachers the best paid in the country and now look at what he's doing. Also the nurses. My mum has been a nurse for 23 years, in aged care, and she's never received a pay rise."

Sean is living with his pregnant wife and two children at his in-laws while he saves money to pay the deposit for a home. He denounced the management's victimisation practices. "Everyone here starts as a picker, but you can then be shifted to other less physical jobs, in dispatch or as a forklift driver," he explained.

"If you then make a mistake, if a pallet falls off your forklift or something, they punish you by putting you back on the pick... There was one guy who didn't take a day off in two years—management decided to make a big deal of it, they had a ceremony in the canteen and gave him an award. Then he made a mistake in dispatch, loaded the wrong truck or something, and he was back on the pick. He's still there now, after six months."

Several workers spoke about serious injuries incurred at the warehouse. Sue, one of a small number of women employed at the warehouse, said: "It's especially hard on females. At the end of the day you go home and there's work to be done there, so by the end of the week your body's really tired. I've been here for five years. I've hurt my back, and I have muscle injuries, also tennis elbow. When you're hurt, there's still constant pressure to get back picking."

Asked what she thought about Prime Minister Julia Gillard's federal government, she voiced a widely-held sentiment expressed by the striking workers: "I'm still Labor, but I hate all of them, they all just lie to get in."

Salad, who came from Somalia ten years ago, has four young children. "I have permanent injuries in my elbows, because I have not been rotated properly in there," he explained. "The human body is not designed for repetitive actions like a robot does, but that's what we have to do. I've had three cortisone anti-inflammatory injections in my right arm, and two in my left.

"The company is now trying to wash their hands of my injury. They say there's no other suitable work for me other than pick work, but that's a pure lie—they just want to get rid of

me. I have a forklift licence, but they discriminate against those who are injured, because they want them to quit and look for a job somewhere else."

Salad said he took home around \$850 a week. "It's hard," he said. "The cost of everything is going up, bread, milk, school costs, housing... I'm happy to do this [strike], because I am fighting for my rights."

The National Union of Workers is deliberately isolating the striking workers. Operations at Coles's other warehouses have been stepped up to maintain supplies to its supermarkets, with the union doing nothing to coordinate a united struggle of warehouse workers.

A similar operation was carried out by the NUW in November 2010, when a six-day strike at a Woolworths' operated distribution warehouse in the Melbourne suburb of Broadmeadows was shut down without any of the workers' central demands being met—including a 6 percent wage increase, a 10 to 1 permanent-to-casual staff ratio and improved work shift and break times. The union agreed to an extension of regular work hours that cut shift pay loading hours, effectively slashing the wages paid to casual workers. (See: "Australia: Union rams through sellout deal for warehouse workers")

Warehouse workers in Somerton need to take their struggle out of the hands of the NUW and form a rank and file committee to coordinate a united industrial and political campaign of warehouse workers throughout Victoria and Australia. A turn must be made to other sections of the working class facing similar attacks on their jobs, wages and conditions, on the basis of the fight for a workers' government and socialist policies. Above all that requires a break with the Labor Party and the building of the Socialist Equality Party as the mass revolutionary party to lead this struggle.

See the SEP web site for further information on our election campaign.

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