

Australian meat workers coerced into bogus pay-cutting ‘ballot’

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Workers at the Teys/Cargill meatworks in Beenleigh, south of Brisbane, were subjected to a company-organised “secret ballot” on August 2 to vote on the latest ultimatum issued by the management: accept deep cuts to pay and conditions, or the plant would be shut down.

In an August 5 media release, Teys corporate affairs manager Tom Maguire proclaimed a “victory” for the company. He declared that a narrow majority of workers had voted for the company’s proposed new enterprise bargaining agreement. Without providing the slightest detail, Maguire claimed that “almost all of the 800 workers took part and the result came down to a handful of votes.”

None of this can be verified, because the ballot was not a public one. Instead, it was conducted on a “fee for service” basis by the Australian Electoral Commission, which refused to disclose the results. Teys/Cargill earlier asserted that the ballot was organised after several hundred workers signed a petition seeking such a vote, but there is no independent evidence of that either. Both the “petition” and the “ballot” were conducted inside the plant, with workers placed under obvious pressure by the management.

Teys, which is in partnership with Cargill, the largest private company in the US, is setting a precedent that will be used by employers everywhere. Cargill, like Ford and General Motors and other transnationals, is restructuring its operations on a global scale, shutting “uncompetitive” plants and driving down wages and conditions in order to boost profits as the world economic situation worsens.

The company fraudulently claimed that its “final offer” provides for 3 percent annual pay rises. In reality, its proposed agreement cuts real wages by up to 20 percent and increases workloads by about 15 percent. Boners and slicers, in particular, would lose more than 20 percent in pay. The plan would impose longer working hours on all meat workers, and slash basic conditions. These include

holidays, annual leave loadings, penalty rates for public holidays, and early knock-off once quotas are met. The “final offer” is designed to deliver the same cost-cutting as the company’s original demand for wage cuts averaging 20 percent.

Teys/Cargill is proceeding ruthlessly, knowing that its demands are fully in line with Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s “national productivity agenda,” which involves an alliance between the Labor government, big business and the trade unions to slash labour costs and drive up workloads. Former Queensland Premier Peter Beattie, recently installed as Labor’s candidate for the seat of Forde, which covers Beenleigh, backs this agenda.

As part of this “productivity” partnership, the union covering the meat workers, the Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union (AMIEU) is totally committed to enforcing the corporate restructuring offensive. While the AMIEU formally opposed the Teys/Cargill package, it gave the company the green light to proceed with its bogus ballot.

AMIEU Queensland branch secretary Brian Crawford told the Brisbane *Courier-Mail* on July 19: “If Teys Australia/Cargill believes that their proposal to increase employees’ work and reduce their pay is so attractive, they should put it up for a vote right now. The union can’t stop them from doing that, it’s their right.”

In other words, the union insisted that the ballot go ahead. That was despite its members voting overwhelmingly, just a week earlier, to oppose the company putting its proposed agreement to any formal vote. (See: “Australian meat workers defy pay-cutting ultimatum”)

Predictably, Teys/Cargill is now demanding that the AMIEU take the next step of signing the company’s package. In an August 6 media statement, Maguire, the Teys spokesman, branded the union’s refusal, so far, to endorse the agreement as “antediluvian” and called on

whichever party won the September 7 federal election to put a stop to “union obstructionism.”

Maguire insisted that Teys workers accepted the company’s ultimatum because they “understood that things had to change in order to make this plant viable for the future and they now just want to move on and work together in a spirit of cooperation.”

This is a complete fraud. Meat workers who spoke to the WSWs told a very different story. They were bitter and angry that many workers had felt they had no choice but to bear the cuts, out of fear of losing their jobs amid rising unemployment.

“I voted no,” a Teys labourer stated. “But others were afraid that the company would shut down, and therefore they had no option. It’s very hard to find another job now, especially for those of us who arrived from overseas in recent years.” He added: “I will lose money, and I’ll have to work longer hours.” Asked if the union had told workers anything in response to the company’s boast of “victory,” he explained it had said nothing.

A slaughterman said people like him were worried about losing their jobs. “I have a family here, and I have to pay my bills. I need to work, but I am not happy. My money will go down by about 30 percent—by up to \$150 a week—and I’ll have to work an extra half an hour each day.”

Both workers explained that they had no confidence that the AMIEU would fight to defend their jobs if they defied the company’s threat of closure. In fact, the union has systematically isolated the Teys workers, as the unions have done to struggle after struggle by workers for the past three decades.

Outside a union meeting in Beenleigh on July 7, the WSWs challenged AMIEU organiser Matt Journeaux to explain why the union refused to call for any broader support for the Teys workers, who were clearly facing a pay-cutting test case that other employers would follow.

Journeaux declared that the union could do nothing because of “secondary boycott laws.” The truth is that the unions have willingly policed these laws—which prohibit wider industrial action to support workers in dispute—since the 1980s. Then, in 2007, they voted for a more extensive set of anti-strike laws, the Labor government’s Fair Work legislation.

In 1985, the AMIEU was the first union to pay a fine under the secondary boycott laws (sections 45D to E of the Trade Practices Act), in the Mudginberri abattoir dispute. A general strike in 1969 had defeated the previous use of penal powers against striking workers, but

the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) enforced the anti-boycott provisions as part of its prices and incomes Accord with the Hawke Labor government.

The ACTU refused to lift a finger in defence of the Mudginberri workers in the Northern Territory. This betrayal became part of succession of defeats inflicted by the Labor Party and the unions on workers, from the outlawing of the Builders Labourers Federation to the deployment of the air force to break the pilots’ strike in 1989. (See: “Industrial relations and the trade unions under Labor: from Whitlam to Rudd”)

On the basis of this record, there is no doubt that the AMIEU will seek to impose, by one means or another, the dictates of Teys/Cargill, just as the car industry unions are doing to the GM Holden workers in Adelaide. The Beenleigh meat workers can defend their jobs, wages and conditions only by rejecting the bogus company ballot permitted by the AMIEU and making a fundamental break with the unions. This means forming their own rank-and-file committee and turning out to other workers, nationally and internationally, like those at GM, who face a similar onslaught.

An independent, political movement of the working class must be developed, fighting for the establishment of a workers’ government based on socialist policies. The banks and basic industries, including meat processing, must be placed under public ownership and the democratic control of working people, to provide for the needs of all, not corporate profits for a wealthy elite. The Socialist Equality Party is standing candidates in the 2013 election to take forward the building of the revolutionary party required to lead these struggles.



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