

Union prepares to sell out Australian meat workers

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29 August 2013

Workers at the Teys/Cargill meatworks in Beenleigh, south of Brisbane, are being deliberately kept in the dark as the Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union (AMIEU) conducts backroom negotiations with the company to strike a deal designed to impose its demands for deep cuts to pay and conditions.

In what has become a major test case for wage-cutting throughout the meat industry and other industries, the company issued workers an ultimatum in May: take pay cuts of about 20 percent across the board or the Beenleigh plant will be shut down.

Ever since then, the union has done everything it can to isolate the Beenleigh workers, keep them straitjacketed within the Labor government's anti-strike Fair Work laws, and cobble together a wretched agreement with the company to enforce the cost-cutting it requires.

Earlier this month, the union effectively gave the go-ahead for Teys/Cargill to conduct its own secret ballot, inside the plant, on its "final offer," which involves increased workloads, an extra hour's work every day, and the shredding of basic conditions, including holidays, annual leave loading and penalty rates.

This ballot was a fraud, with workers coerced into voting with the threat of closure hanging over their heads. Despite this intimidation, half the workforce rejected the company's proposed enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA). According to the AMIEU, 359 voted yes and 350 no, but 19 office and supervisory staff were allowed to vote, even though they are not covered by the EBA.

While claiming to reject the ballot, the union has blocked any fight by workers against it. Instead, the AMIEU has put the dispute back into the hands of the Fair Work Commission (FWC)—the industrial court that polices the Labor government's Fair Work legislation.

The entire union leadership, including the AMIEU, voted for this legislation, which outlaws all solidarity strikes and any industrial action outside narrow "enterprise bargaining periods" at individual plants.

On Monday, the dispute was swiftly taken behind closed doors into a FWC "confidential conference." According to a FWC spokesperson, the two parties undertook to do "some homework" on the Teys/Cargill application for the tribunal to approve its EBA. Far from opposing the EBA, the union entered talks with the management and agreed for the application to be adjourned and re-listed on September 16.

Beenleigh workers say they have not heard from the AMIEU since the company ballot was staged on August 2. "I haven't seen the union for three weeks, a Teys labourer told the WWSW. "We have had no news about the EBA or the union. We are working every day, still under the old hours and conditions. It's like waiting for rain!"

The meat worker, who voted no in the "ballot," said he wanted to see the union about an issue with his job, but there was no sign of the AMIEU. "Maybe they've run away," he commented.

These developments are another warning that the AMIEU is determined to deliver the savings the company wants, while stifling and suppressing the opposition of workers, just as the car industry unions have just done at General Motors Holden.

There, the unions, backed by the Labor government, negotiated a deal that sets a new benchmark for a wholesale corporate assault on workers' wages and conditions. The Holden agreement includes a three-year wage freeze and a raft of concessions on annual leave, overtime, shifts and the use of casual labour. (See: "GM Holden's wage-cutting deal and the Labor government's 'productivity' agenda")

Teys Australia is a joint venture with Cargill, a US-based agribusiness giant—one of the world’s largest food and meat processors. Like GM and other transnationals, Cargill 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 deteriorates. On February 1, it shut down a meat plant in Plainview, West Texas, destroying 2,000 jobs.

For the past two weeks, the company, backed by the mass media, has peddled outright lies that workers at Beenleigh voted on August 2 to accept its dictates. Teys/Cargill is aggressively pushing ahead, confident that it has the bipartisan support of both the Labor government and the Liberal-National Coalition.

The company’s cost-cutting drive is entirely in line with Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s call for a new “national productivity agenda” to drive down labour costs in partnership with employers and the trade union movement. One of the most enthusiastic supporters of this policy is former Queensland Premier Peter Beattie, the recently-installed Labor candidate for the seat of Forde, which covers the meat plant.

Opposition leader Tony Abbott has also thrown his weight behind Teys/Cargill—another indication that the ruling establishment regards the dispute as a test case. At an August 17 Brisbane media conference, Abbott backed the company’s false claims about the ballot, declaring: [O]bviously if the workers there are happy, if it is going to produce more secure jobs, a better future for the workers at the plant, well it’s hard to see why anyone would object to it.”

The next day, deputy opposition leader Julie Bishop visited the Beenleigh plant for confidential talks with the management on August 18, accompanied by the Liberal candidate for Forde, Bert van Manen.

Teys/Cargill has reiterated its threat to shut the plant. In a comment published by the *Australian Financial Review* on August 22, CEO Brad Teys said the new EBA was “vital to the future of this plant, which competes with much lower production and labour costs from overseas competitors.” He appealed to the union to help deliver the required outcome. “[I]f we are serious about protecting Australian manufacturing, we’ll start to talk about the real issues and work together towards a solution,” he wrote.

In comments to the media, AMIEU Queensland state

secretary Brian Crawford has promoted the illusion that any deal struck by the union must meet a “better off overall test” under Labor’s Fair Work Act. That test did not prevent the GM Holden package being forced on workers.

Once the federal election is over, whether a Liberal- or Labor-led government takes office, the AMIEU will seek to oblige, just as the unions did at GM Holden. The Beenleigh meat workers can defend their interests only by rejecting the backroom sellout being prepared by the AMIEU, forming their own rank-and-file committee and turning out to other workers, nationally and internationally who face similar onslaughts.

This struggle will necessarily involve a confrontation with the incoming government. That means developing an independent, political movement of the working class, fighting for the establishment of a workers’ government based on a socialist program.



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