

New Zealand Meat Workers Union calls off two-day strike

John Braddock
12 August 2015

On Sunday afternoon the New Zealand Meat Workers Union (MWU) called off a planned strike at eight AFFCO sheds for Monday and Tuesday this week, and a rally at parliament. About 1,000 meat workers had voted to strike after talks between the Talley's-owned company and the union failed. In a statement the MWU said it called off the strike following a meeting with co-owner Andrew Talley and a group acting on behalf of Maori tribal leaders. Workers are now due to meet in the coming days to consider the situation.

The circumstances around the strike and its last-minute cancellation again underline the fact that workers who are entering into struggles over basic work conditions and living standards are confronted not only with vicious and reactionary employers, but by the entire political establishment, including the unions and the Labour Party.

This includes the Maori tribal leaders in the Iwi Leaders Group which represents the interests of the Maori political and business elite, not the large numbers of Maori workers in the meat industry. Its representatives at Sunday's talks included Ken Mair, an official of the Maori Party which has, since 2008, been a coalition partner in the National government and supported all its attacks on the working class. The second representative was Tukoroirangi Morgan, a former MP in the right-wing populist NZ First Party and a key player in Maori business enterprises associated with the Tainui tribe, which control assets worth over \$NZ1 billion.

As far as the MWU was concerned, the call for a two-day strike was only ever a cynical exercise to pressure AFFCO to return to the bargaining table so that it could negotiate a settlement. A key resolution passed at the MWU national conference in April did no more than beg Talley's "to enter into constructive dialogue and

negotiation with the union in the same way other meat companies do."

AFFCO is demanding an employment contract for the coming season that contains a wholesale assault on conditions. It attacks existing pay rates, lengthens the working day, puts an end to seniority for workers and changes work breaks.

AFFCO is also attempting to force its employees to sign individual agreements, which ban workers' meetings without prior approval from the employer and authorise an employer representative to discuss any medical history or work injury claims of employees with any medical practitioner, specialist, ACC employee, insurer or former employer.

The dispute has already been running for 18 months. The MWU called the strike when AFFCO quit mediation and applied to end negotiations under new National Party government legislation, introduced in March, allowing employers to opt-out of collective agreements. Led by the NZ Council of Trade Unions, the unions feigned support for the meat workers on the grounds that their planned action represented the beginning of organised resistance to National's employment laws.

The unions have been operating from the outset, to isolate and wear down workers. MWU national secretary Graham Cook insisted that Talley's is "an outlier ... in the way it deals with employment relations and health and safety"—that is, it is the exception rather than the rule—to justify its failure to mobilise other workers who face similar conditions.

The MWU has continually sought to tie the dispute up in fruitless negotiations and court proceedings. Last month Chief Employment Court Judge Graeme Colgan dismissed court action brought by the MWU over AFFCO's move to lock out 190 workers at the

Rangiuru plant who refused to sign individual agreements. While Colgan warned AFFCO that many of the terms and conditions of its individual employment agreements appeared to be of “dubious validity,” he ordered the parties back into mediation, which the MWU accepted but AFFCO walked away from.

The law that AFFCO has been using to bludgeon workers into accepting its conditions is an extension to the anti-worker Employment Relations Act (ERA) introduced by the 1999-2008 Labour government, supported by the unions, and kept in place by National. The ERA contains draconian prohibitions on the right to strike while placing unions at the centre of negotiating collective contracts. After coming into office in 2008, National made a number of minor amendments in order to extend its reach.

In a bitter dispute in 2012, Talley’s locked out 1,000 meat workers for 84 days. The unions insisted that workers accept the regressive provisions of the ERA, which legalised lockouts as long as a collective employment agreement remains unsettled, while outlawing “secondary” stoppages by other workers. Under the ERA, 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 tacitly backed all these betrayals, demanding “good faith bargaining” by both sides, while the various pseudo-left outfits sought to keep workers corralled behind the unions.

Labour leader Andrew Little, a former national secretary of the Engineering Printing and Manufacturing Union, last month declared that a future Labour government would retain National’s “90 day trial” provisions, with only vague minor modifications. This draconian law enables employers to sack new hires without reason and without any recourse, including access to personal grievance provisions. Last year Little promised that under Labour the 90-day law would go.

The cancellation of the latest strike is no surprise. Labour and the unions have been complicit over three decades in suppressing the class struggle on behalf of governments and the corporate elite. According to Statistics NZ figures, official strikes have declined almost every year since 1986. Between 2005 and 2013, the last year for which figures are available, the number

of strikes dropped from 60 to just 6. In 2013 there were only 270 workers involved in official strike action, for a total of 483 work days lost.

Those who have benefitted are the wealthy elite. The Talley family, with a fortune estimated at \$NZ300 million (\$US196 million), occupies a prominent place on the *National Business Review* “Rich List,” whose members have expanded their collective wealth year-on-year since the 2008 financial crisis.

The Talley’s fortune is built on the extreme exploitation of thousands of workers. The company has extensive business interest across the seafood, vegetables, meat and dairy industries and is notorious for breaches of health and safety regulations and other legal restraints on profit-taking. Talley’s has repeatedly used illegal lockouts to force workers into harsh and oppressive contracts, and has been forced to pay thousands of dollars in fines over safety breaches. In April the group was found guilty of failing to ensure the safety of employee and father of five, Cain Adams, after he fell almost seven metres to his death through an insecure hatch on one of its tuna boats.

In June Peter Talley was knighted by the government for “services to business and philanthropy.”

The MWU had originally described the strike as a “protest” over the meat workers’ “third world conditions.” These conditions, which exist in every industry, have been imposed over an extended period of time with the full collaboration of the pro-capitalist unions which have acted as agents of the employers and governments.

Workers can only defend their jobs, conditions and living standards by mounting a rebellion against the unions, forming their own independent rank-and-file committees and turning to other sections of workers on the basis of a new political perspective—the fight for a workers’ government and socialist policies, including the nationalisation of the meat companies under democratic workers’ control.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact