

Australian warehouse workers defy court order to end strike

Our correspondents
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Workers employed by the giant Australian supermarket chain, Woolworths, at its Melbourne Liquor Distribution Centre (MLDC) in the western suburb of Laverton voted again yesterday to maintain a 24-hour picket line in defiance of a return to work order by the federal government's industrial court, the Fair Work Commission (FWC).

Since early Monday morning, workers have blocked all entrances to the warehouse, preventing trucks entering or leaving, in a fight against the introduction of a labour-hire company.

Yesterday, the strikers also voted to end negotiations with the company. Woolworths has not only refused to back down on its labour-hire plans but is insisting on issuing formal warnings to all strikers—the first step toward dismissal.

The Woolworths workers have become the second group of strikers currently defying FWC return to work orders, following similar votes by Hutchison Port workers fighting retrenchments in Brisbane and Sydney.

Despite claiming to defend the jobs and rights of the 520 warehouse workers, the National Union of Workers (NUW) has isolated the dispute and publicly dissociated itself from the strike. It announced on its Facebook site that “the NUW does not authorise the continuation of the industrial action.”

The union said it had “advised its members” of the FWC order, and “the possible consequences of not complying” with it. This leaves the workers exposed to prosecution for engaging in “unlawful” industrial action.

Workers said the current enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA), negotiated by the NUW, had no provision for the company to bring in outside workers. Yet, the company plans to use a labour-hire company,

Chandler McLeod, at the facility, thus undermining workers' wages and conditions. This would deepen the assault on workers at the centre, where about 40 percent of the workforce is already casualised.

The permanent casuals can earn less than \$20,000 a year. A striking worker told the *World Socialist Web Site* he often gets just one shift a week, and must wait at home for a text message to come to work. “If they bring in labour hire companies, there will be an even bigger pool of workers available and they will just reduce conditions further,” he said.

Another worker said the management had already been placing more pressure on workers to perform. “Everyone wears a headset and the management know how long a break you had and if you were late back to work. They are more closely monitoring the workforce. Sometimes workers are asked, ‘why are you picking slowly?’”

Another worker said the NUW had allowed Woolworths to sack at least one worker after he was critical of the EBA. “We gave up conditions three years ago and allowed agency casuals to load containers,” he said. “We keep giving and they [the company] don't give anything back.”

Any claim by the NUW to oppose labour-hire is completely bogus. The union has already accepted its use within the Woolworths distribution centre at Broadmeadows, in Melbourne's north. At another distribution centre, the NUW negotiated a two-tier wage structure with Woolworths, whereby new employees would start on a lower wage of \$22 an hour, frozen for four years.

Woolworths' decision to further tear up workplace conditions at Laverton is part of an overall restructuring. The move came on top of an earlier announcement that the company would close its

Broadmeadows facility, eliminating the jobs of 680 workers by 2018, and replace it with a “state-of-the-art” distribution centre. This will add to the mass unemployment in the area—already more than 20 percent officially—with Ford closing down its Broadmeadows assembly plant by next year, also with the assistance of the trade unions.

Like the Hutchison Port workers, the 680 workers were told of the closure by a text message from Woolworths. Woolworths is also retrenching 1,000 butchers from its supermarkets and pressuring apprentice butchers to accept “fast-track” apprenticeships.

By distancing itself from the Laverton strike, the NUW has sent a clear signal to the company and the government that no other NUW workers will be mobilised to support the striking workers. It is fully committed to enforcing the anti-strike provisions of the Fair Work Act, which was adopted by the previous federal Labor government, with the complete support of the entire trade union leadership.

The prominent presence of members of the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative at the picket, who vehemently defend the role of the NUW, is a further warning that a union sellout is being prepared. This group has a long record of assisting, and then seeking to justify, the NUW’s betrayals, including of a six-day strike and picket by Woolworths warehouse workers at Broadmeadows in late 2010. The union rammed through a settlement that included an effective wage cut for casuals.

In 2011–12, the NUW, backed by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), and supported by the pseudo-left groups, sold out a five-week strike by Swift cold storage workers, also in Melbourne, resulting in a further deterioration of their pay and conditions.

In July 2012, the NUW shut down a two-week strike and 24-hour picket by hundreds of warehouse workers in northern Melbourne, at a Toll Holdings-operated distribution centre for supermarket giant Coles. After deliberately isolating and wearing down the workers, while allowing Coles to avoid any significant disruption to its business by stepping up operations in other warehouses, the NUW rammed through a regressive EBA that met none of the workers’ central demands.

The workers at Laverton can defend their interests only by making a conscious political break from the NUW and the rest of the trade union apparatus, which has operated as an industrial police force against the working class for decades. The strikers need to form new organisations of struggle, such as rank and file committees, and turn out to unite with other sections of workers in Australia and internationally, all of whom are facing similar attacks.

This requires the rejection of the big business program of the unions and the Labor Party, and a turn to a socialist perspective, based on the fight for a workers’ government, including to nationalise the food industry and other basic industries under democratic workers’ control, for the benefit of working people, not the wealthy corporate elite.



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