

Australian union sells out Woolworths warehouse strikers

Our correspondents
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The National Union of Workers (NUW) last week sold out a defiant four-day strike by workers employed by the Australian supermarket chain Woolworths at its Liquor Distribution Centre in the western Melbourne suburb of Laverton.

After four days of union officials isolating the strike and then claiming that the strikers could face crippling fines, NUW national secretary Tim Kennedy pushed through a return-to-work vote. Neither of the workers' demands was met—no use of labour-hire companies and no retribution against the strikers.

The workers launched an indefinite strike on August 10 to fight Woolworths' plan to introduce a labour-hire company, Chandler McLeod, to supply temporary workers. Such use of contract employees contravened an enterprise bargaining agreement signed last year by the union and the company.

Around 200 workers set up a 24-hour picket, blocking all movement of trucks in and out of the facility. Like the Hutchison dockworkers fighting sackings in Sydney and Brisbane, they defied a return-to-work order by the federal government's Fair Work Commission (FWC).

On August 12, Woolworths successfully applied to the FWC to have the strike action declared illegal, but at a meeting that day workers on the picket line voted to remain on strike regardless of the order. Later, confronted by management's intransigence, a strikers' meeting voted to halt negotiations with the company.

The next day, however, the dispute was shut down after talks resumed between NUW officials and Woolworths. Kennedy informed workers that the trade union had agreed to the company's demand to use labour-hire casuals. Yet, he claimed that was a victory because the NUW would have a say on the numbers employed, as well as when they could be used, and

which labour-hire company was involved.

From the outset, the NUW sought to isolate and shut down the strike. At the FWC hearing, the union's lawyer spent the entire proceedings distancing the union and its officials from the stand taken by the workers.

The union made clear it would do everything it could to enforce a return-to-work order issued under the Fair Work Act's anti-strike provisions, which were adopted by the previous federal Labor government with the complete agreement of the trade union movement.

The NUW's lawyer told the FWC that the strike was "spontaneous" and "there is no evidence it will continue when it is stopped." In other words, the union agreed with the return-to-work and was eager to show that it would enforce the order.

At the final strike meeting, the union tried to intimidate workers, claiming that if they stayed out any longer they could face personal fines of up to \$10,000 each, have injunctions served on them and face criminal charges. According to one report, when a delegate got up to speak about the return to work, NUW officials took the microphone from him.

On top of this, workers were informed that the company was placing them all on a six-month warning and that several employees were facing an investigation involving possible criminal charges over alleged actions on the picket line. With the union refusing to oppose any of this, the majority of workers voted to return to work.

The NUW will now go back to the same FWC that declared the strike illegal and apply for a variation of the workplace agreement to permit the use of labour-hire casuals.

One worker told the *World Socialist Web Site* the result was a complete sell-out. He explained that

workers had fought successfully during the previous talks over the workplace agreement to force the company to drop its demands for the use of labour-hire companies, only to have the union now allow them to come in.

Upon returning to work, the worker said, the company presented the strikers with a letter welcoming them back, along with a chocolate. At the same time, Woolworths informed them that they must attend a counselling session.

Under the deal struck between the company and the union, the worker explained, the labour-hire casuals would be signed up as new NUW members, earning the same hourly wage as level-one employees—\$23 an hour. They will have no rights and can be hired and fired at will.

Far from embarking on “union-busting,” the company relied upon the NUW to betray the strike. For the NUW, like the Maritime Union of Australia, a “victory” consists of the union bureaucracy maintaining its role as the agency for suppressing workers’ resistance to the management’s requirements.

To find a way forward, and overturn such defeats, the Laverton workers, and other employees, need to break out of the grip of the NUW and the entire Labor Party and trade union apparatus that the NUW epitomises.

Unless reversed, the NUW’s sellout will assist it and Woolworths to break resistance to the company’s overall restructuring, which includes closing the Broadmeadows warehouse in northern Melbourne, eliminating the jobs of 680 workers by 2018. In order to drive up its profits, Woolworths also plans to retrench 1,000 butchers from its supermarkets.

A new perspective is needed to end the NUW’s long record of betraying key workers’ struggles, including a six-day strike and picket by the 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, sold out a five-week strike by Swift cold storage workers, also in Melbourne, resulting in a further deterioration of their pay and conditions at the hands of the global food conglomerate.

Then 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 Coles, another supermarket giant.

Workers at Woolworths and everywhere else need to draw critical lessons from these bitter experiences. Rank-and-file committees must be formed, completely independent of the unions. Woolworths’ workers need to turn out to other sections of warehouse and logistics workers, including those exploited by labour-hire companies.

Such a struggle requires an opposed political program. Decent wages, jobs and conditions can be won only through a struggle against the capitalist profit system itself, and its enforcement agencies in the trade unions and Labor Party. This means taking up the fight for a workers’ government, based on a socialist program of placing the food industry, the banks and other basic industries under public ownership and democratic workers’ control.



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