

New Zealand: Taylor Preston meat workers take industrial action

Tom Peters
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Hundreds of workers have been taking industrial action over low wages at the Taylor Preston meat-processing factory in Wellington since January 24.

Members of the New Zealand Meat Workers and Related Trades Union (MWU), who make up approximately half of the 900 workers at the plant, are working reduced shifts (eight hours a day compared with the normal 9.5 or longer) and have stopped working on weekends.

Workers are demanding an extra 50 cents per hour, back-dated to May last year. For at least the past year, union members have received 30 cents an hour less than non-union members. Workers also want additional allowances for overtime and for working on weekends and at night.

The MWU has kept industrial action to a bare minimum, allowing the plant to continue operating, while it negotiates with the company behind the backs of the workers. The union has made no public statement on the dispute, which has not been reported anywhere in the media. The *World Socialist Web Site* learnt about it by speaking with Taylor Preston workers.

The MWU's February newsletter says nothing about the industrial action but merely states that "negotiations" are underway with Taylor Preston and "workers have quite a lot of catching up to do in their pay rates." The *Daily Blog*, which is funded by the MWU and several other unions, has not mentioned the dispute.

The pseudo-left groups—the International Socialist Organisation, Fightback, Socialist Aotearoa and Redline—have also remained silent. All of them have links with the unions and have falsely promoted the MWU as a vehicle to defend jobs.

In fact, as it has done many times before, the MWU is

seeking to isolate and wear down the workers at Taylor Preston and compel them to accept a deal which does nothing to substantially improve their pay and conditions.

This is the first industrial action at Taylor Preston since 2006, when about 300 workers held a three-day strike over low wages. More than a decade later, most workers at the site still only receive about a dollar above the legal minimum of \$15.25 an hour. Even workers who have been with the company for many years receive little more than \$16 an hour.

Taylor Preston exports meat to dozens of markets, including the US, Europe and Asia, and has export revenue of around \$250 million per year. Its workforce, however, is the lowest paid in the New Zealand meat-processing industry.

Work at the factory is grueling and accidents are common. The company has been convicted and fined in 2005, 2007, 2013 and 2015 over a series of hand injuries, including two finger amputations. Workers are also concerned about asbestos in the factory roof, which was built in the 1950s.

The union's principal concern is not workers' pay and conditions but maintaining its dues base. MWU national membership has dropped dramatically over the past five years, from 18,100 in 2011 to 13,550 in 2016. Thousands of workers see no reason to join the MWU. Like their counterparts internationally, the unions have long ceased to function as defensive workers' organisations but operate as the adjuncts of big business and the government, helping to impose layoffs, wage cuts and factory closures.

Workers told the WSWWS that a meeting of 200 workers at Taylor Preston in mid-2016 overwhelmingly voted in favour of industrial action, with only two people voting against, but the union organised nothing

until late January.

“It’s almost like the union is not there,” one worker with almost 10 years’ experience at the site told the WSWS. “They’ll be quiet for months on end, then they ring up and say, ‘Hey, there’s a meeting on,’ or give us a newsletter, but that’s it.”

Asked about the impact of the industrial action on Taylor Preston’s operations, the worker explained: “I guess they’re not making as much money, though it’s not really making a difference because the stock numbers are down, because there’s a drought.”

Every year during the off-season workers are laid off for weeks, and sometimes two or three months if there is a prolonged drought. Many are forced to apply for welfare payments. Workers expect these annual layoffs to start soon.

The miserable pay and lack of job security in New Zealand’s meat-processing industry is the outcome of decades of betrayals by the trade union bureaucracy. While meat workers struck repeatedly to fight wage cuts and redundancies from the 1970s to the 1990s, the MWU accepted plant closures as inevitable.

At a conference of the Australian Agricultural Economics Society in July 1989, MWU president Roger Middlemass called for the “orderly transition of ownership and reduction in plant capacity” in the industry. “Hard decisions have to be made with far reaching consequences... The unions are prepared to accept that responsibility,” he said.

Between 1986 and 1990 alone, during the Labour government of David Lange, 15,000 meat workers were made redundant. Entire towns and working-class suburbs were devastated by factory closures, which continued throughout the 1990s and 2000s.

In October 2014, Middlemass told the *Manawatu Standard* that the union would agree to more closures to reduce “overcapacity” and protect the profits of New Zealand companies. Last October Silver Fern Farms closed two factories in Mossburn and Frasertown, with 110 job losses. A MWU official told Radio NZ on October 26 the Mossburn closure was “terrible” but “something that had to happen.”

New attacks are now being prepared in response to declining New Zealand meat exports, which have fallen over the past two years. The rise in nationalism and protectionism, particularly following the Brexit vote in the UK and the election of Trump in the US, is

producing concern for exporters seeking to access these markets.

To fight for decent jobs, wages and conditions, meat workers will need to carry out a struggle against the MWU, the Labour Party, and the pseudo-left supporters of these organisations. At Taylor Preston this will involve workers forming an independent rank-and-file committee, which they themselves control, and linking up with other workers facing similar attacks in the meat industry and elsewhere.

Such a unified struggle can only be carried forward by rejecting nationalism and anti-immigrant xenophobia which is used by the MWU to divide workers and distract attention from the union’s role in the assault on jobs and wages.

Above all, New Zealand workers need a socialist and internationalist perspective. Vital industries such as food production should be placed under the ownership and control of the working class and run in the interests of human need, not private profit.



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