New Zealand meat union pushes through pro-company deal at Taylor Preston

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After more than two months of industrial action, meat processing workers in Wellington voted on April 7 on a contract drawn up by the Meat Workers Union (MWU) and the Taylor Preston company. The agreement pushed through by the union bureaucracy further entrenches the poverty wages and insecure conditions at the factory, which has some of the lowest paid workers in New Zealand.

The two-year agreement includes an extra 70 cents an hour for union members, who are about half the 900 workers at the site. Cleaners will receive a slightly bigger pay rise. The increase amounts to roughly $25 a week for a full time worker, around the price of one cup of coffee per day.

Since last May, when the previous contract expired, union members have been paid 30 cents less than non-members.

The deal mirrors the government's pitiful increase to the minimum wage, which went up 50 cents an hour on April 1, from $15.25 to $15.75. Most Taylor Preston workers, even those with many years' experience, will still receive little more than the minimum wage.

A worker who attended the April 7 MWU meeting told the *World Socialist Web Site* it lasted over an hour and a number of workers expressed anger about the agreement. Some questioned why it did not include back-pay from May 2016, which the MWU claimed it was seeking in negotiations. The union officials had no answer, other than to say they could not get a better deal.

Workers received a one-off payment of $125 (before tax) for approving the deal. This will cover only a small fraction of wages lost during the dispute.

The agreement does not include any additional pay for weekend and night shift workers. Workers will be paid time-and-a-half rates only if they work longer than 45 hours a week—down from 47.5 hours under the previous agreement.

The deal maintains the casualised status of workers. Their hours can be drastically reduced without notice when stock numbers fall. Every year during the off-season, meat workers throughout the country are laid off, sometimes for a month or longer, without pay. They are forced to rely on family members or the government's miserly welfare payments. All this is accepted by the MWU.

Workers were not given the full contract to read prior to voting, just a one-page summary. The WSWS understands that between 100 and 200 workers attended the April 7 meeting and not all union members have voted on the agreement. A majority of those who voted approved the deal, having been worn down by limited industrial action, during which they worked marginally reduced shift hours and refused to work weekends.

Several workers told the WSWS they were not happy with the agreement but voted for it because they could no longer survive on reduced income. In fact, the industrial action was designed to play into the company's hands. There was no strike called, nor was support sought from non-union members and meat workers at other plants. Instead, workers were organised to finish at 3.00 p.m. rather than the usual 4.30 p.m., at a time when the killing season was beginning to wind down anyway, causing only minimal disruption.

Now the "action" has been ended on terms dictated by the employer.

The union has not announced the exact results of the secret ballot and made no public statement on the agreement. The media and pseudo-left organisations completely ignored the industrial action at one of Wellington's largest employers. Only the WSWS

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reported on the dispute.

When a worker at the April 7 meeting asked why the union had remained silent, a MWU official said coverage of the dispute would not be sympathetic to workers.

The real reason for the MWU's silence is that it never intended to carry out a fight to improve wages and conditions. For decades, the union has collaborated with the meat processing companies, negotiating with management behind the backs of the workers while suppressing resistance from workers to increased exploitation in the industry.

Before the recent action there had not been a strike at Taylor Preston in 10 years. The only reason the union took action this year was to try and stop the ongoing decline in its membership and dues.

Hundreds of thousands of workers see no reason to join unions, which work hand-in-hand with corporations and the government. They are run by privileged bureaucracies whose job is to enforce redundancies, wage freezes and factory closures under the nationalist banner of making New Zealand-based companies profitable.

Meat workers have historically been among the most militant in the New Zealand working class. Today, following repeated betrayals by the MWU, they face increasingly intolerable conditions.

The latest company-union agreement at Taylor Preston means another two years of poverty wages while the cost of living, especially for housing, continues to soar.

Workers should fight to overturn this rotten deal. A new struggle must be launched for a substantial and backdated increase in wages, along with other basic provisions such as five weeks' guaranteed annual leave and double wages for night and weekend shifts. The regime of casualised labour and the policy of sacking workers every year must end. Workers must demand the right to a secure job on a decent wage that can support a family.

Such a fight requires a rebellion against the MWU, which insists there is no alternative to the company's dictates. Workers should establish their own rank-and-file factory committee, totally independent of the MWU, and seek to unite with workers in meat processing and other industries who are facing similar attacks.

The fight against low wages is inseparable from a political struggle against capitalism and the nationalism used by the unions and the Labour Party to divide workers from each other. Workers need their own political party, based on socialism and uniting workers internationally. The Socialist Equality Group calls on workers to contact us to discuss how to advance this struggle.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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