

New Zealand: Taylor Preston meat workers condemn union pay deal

Tom Peters
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After more than two months of limited 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 deal further entrenches the poverty wages and insecure conditions at the factory. Most Taylor Preston workers, even those with many years' experience, will still receive little more than the official minimum wage, recently increased from \$15.25 to \$15.75.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to a number of workers and found widespread anger over the agreement and the union's refusal to mount any struggle for better wages and conditions for more than a decade. Fearing victimisation, they asked that their names be withheld.

One worker described it as a "kick in the teeth" and said: "I feel sorry for the guys with kids. I work full time and I'm struggling, and it's just me and my wife, so those guys must be really struggling. I'm probably going to be moving overseas soon, there's just not enough money here."

A majority of workers voted in favour of the deal, having been worn down by futile, limited industrial action, which consisted of a ban on overtime and some weekend shifts. Several workers told the WSWS they opposed the agreement but voted for it because they could no longer survive on reduced income with no victory in sight.

In the course of the dispute, the union made no public statements and did everything it could to isolate workers, wear them down and convince them there was no alternative but to accept the pro-company deal.

The vote had many fundamentally anti-democratic aspects. The full text of the agreement was not given to workers before the vote and has still not been circulated. Only a three-paragraph hand-written

summary of the main points was made available. The MWU has not announced the exact results of the secret ballot.

One worker, who still receives just \$16.80 an hour despite being at the company more than 20 years, told the WSWS that "we used to have much better conditions," including bonuses that allowed workers to survive during seasonal layoff periods. Every year workers can have their hours slashed and are routinely laid-off for a month or longer, without pay, when stock numbers decline. The union has accepted this for decades.

The worker said he and some others had planned to vote against the deal but were "swayed" during the April 7 meeting, which lasted almost two hours. He said union leaders spoke at length and one of them justified accepting the agreement by saying workers could not survive on the reduced shifts and more would leave the union if industrial action continued.

In fact, the union purposely designed the overtime ban to cause little disruption to the company's operations. The reduced pay, however, caused significant hardship to workers.

Another worker criticised the token character of the industrial action: "There hasn't been a systematic attack on the company, [the union] has stood back ... The disparity has grown to such a degree that it's getting ridiculous and if we don't start addressing it in a proper way, which the union seems not to have done, we're going to be in trouble in the future.

"Taylor Preston is on the bottom end of the wage scale of all the meatworks. The union should have been working the hardest for our company, in order to bring them in line with the rest of the pay rates of the entire sector. It seems like there's a coordinated campaign between the companies and the unions."

A further worker pointed to the broader social crisis, saying the government and the opposition Labour Party had done nothing to address low wages and social inequality. “It’s getting to the point where all these people are living in cars. No matter whether you vote National or Labour, nothing’s going to change.”

The Meat Workers Union is now engaged in an operation to deceive meat workers throughout the country about the agreement. Its April newsletter promoted the deal as a “major step forward for MWU members.”

This is a lie. The two-year agreement includes an increase of 70 cents an hour for the majority of union members, who make up nearly 400 workers at the site (just under half the workforce).

The MWU newsletter does not mention this miserably low figure. Instead it states that the union’s negotiations, combined with industrial action, resulted in “an increase of nearly double the company’s original wage offer.”

All this actually means is that Taylor Preston’s initial offer of 35 cents an hour, which would have brought union members’ pay into line with non-union members, was doubled. The MWU also neglects to mention that its members will receive no backdated pay for the period since May 2016 when their previous agreement expired.

Since the deal was signed-off, non-union members have reportedly been given a raise by the company that restores their pay differential.

The union itself notes that Taylor Preston “has a history of low wage rates, ranging from \$2 to \$10 an hour below industry norms.” In fact, its workers are the lowest paid in the New Zealand meat industry.

Workers throughout the country are being driven to fight for better pay and conditions, in response to austerity measures and the soaring cost of living. In recent weeks, thousands of disability support workers at IDEA Services and fast food workers at Restaurant Brands have taken industrial action.

In both disputes, however, workers find themselves trapped by union bureaucracies which limit industrial action to ineffective and isolated gestures, aimed at letting off steam, while negotiating pro-company contracts that will entrench poverty-level wages. The Unite union is pushing for a pay rise for Restaurant Brands workers of just 30 cents an hour, spread over

three years. Like the MWU, it presents this insultingly low amount as a significant step forward for workers.

Workers must demand the right to decent pay and conditions. Meat workers at Taylor Preston and other factories should unite their struggles with those of other workers in New Zealand and internationally who are facing similar attacks.

A real fight requires a rebellion against the unions and the Labour Party, which work together with the government to increase the exploitation of workers and defend the profits of New Zealand businesses.

In every workplace, workers need to form their own rank-and-file committees which they control. In opposition to the entire political establishment, workers must raise the demand for a workers’ government to implement socialist policies based on meeting the pressing needs of the majority, not the private profits of the wealthy few.

We urge Taylor Preston workers who agree with this perspective to contact the Socialist Equality Group to discuss how to advance this struggle.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact