

Australia: Another “super union” merger—a bigger industrial policeman

Terry Cook
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Members of the United Voice union and the National Union of Workers (NUW) voted in late August for an amalgamation that will create a supposed “super union.” The new organisation, to be named the United Workers Union (UWU), will constitute Australia’s fourth largest union, with a claimed membership of around 150,000.

The UWU will have a substantial presence in key strategic areas of the economy, including logistics, healthcare, defence, manufacturing, supermarkets food supply chains and coverage of workers employed by major third party contractors such as Thales, Linfox, Broadspectrum, Serco and Spotless.

The Fair Work Commission (FWC), the federal pro-business industrial tribunal, allowed balloting for the merger after finding the proposed amalgamation met the requirements under the Registered Organisations Act and was not opposed by either employers or other unions. Some 45,000 workers across both unions took part in the merger ballot, which ran for 35 days.

Officials from the two unions issued statements to the media fraudulently proclaiming that the new formation would be a massive boon for workers. Stating that the current industrial relations system “has failed workers,” United Voice national secretary Jo Schofield declared: “In this light it is exciting for members to consider a proposal that would allow workers across the country to build power and through their actions win big, long-lasting gains.” NUW secretary Tim Kennedy stated that the UWU “would be a significant voice for workers in both the public and private sectors.”

Such claims are belied by the decades-long experiences of workers who have known nothing but betrayals and sell-outs at the hands of the unions that have worked hand in glove with business to impose an ever-deepening assault on jobs, wages and conditions.

For example, the NUW has worked to contain workers opposition in the key warehousing sector such as at Chemist Warehouse and supermarket giants’ Woolworths and Coles distribution centres. It has imposed enterprise work agreements that establish and maintain low pay regimes and extremely high levels of workforce casualisation.

Typifying such outcomes, NUM members at Chemist Warehouse (CWH) distribution centres in Melbourne and Brisbane were paid an average of just \$20.84 per hour prior to the latest sell-out deal in March. Two labour hire companies provided 75 and 80 percent of the CWH workforce. This year’s agreement gave workers’ annual pay increases of just 4.75 percent, while tying them into a four-year contract under conditions of a rapidly rising cost-of-living. Casuals still make up the overwhelming majority of the workforce.

United Voice, which covers low paid workers in areas such as Early Childhood Education, hospitality, casinos, aged care, cleaning and disability support, has acted as ruthlessly as the NUW to prevent any unified campaign by workers to improve working conditions and low levels of pay.

In dispute after dispute, both unions have utilised the draconian anti-strike provisions enshrined in the current Fair Work Australia (FWA) legislation to call off industrial action and impose outcomes in line with employers’ demands.

Schofield’s claim that the current industrial relations system has “failed workers” is an attempt to cover up this rotten record. The FWA laws, introduced by the former Rudd Labor government in 2009 with the full backing of the unions, were always meant to penalise workers and back the employers’ continuous offensive against wages and conditions.

Moreover, the unions have imposed the framework of the enterprise bargaining system introduced by the Keating Labor government in 1993 to end industry-wide campaigns for wages and working conditions. Therefore, larger membership has nothing to do with strengthening the position of workers in bargaining because they will remain divided on an enterprise-by-enterprise basis.

The merger, like that carried out by the construction, maritime and textiles unions last year, is aimed at shoring up the crisis-ridden union bureaucracy. Through such manoeuvres, the unions are attempting to offset plunging membership levels due to the exodus of disgusted workers and the refusal of young people to sign up to organisations that they do not believe will advance their interests.

According to Australian Bureau of Statistics figures last year, just 10 percent of private sector workers are union members, along with 38 percent in the public sector. Both are record lows. According to Roy Morgan surveys, just 6.9 percent of workers under the age of 25 belong to a union.

Unions are keenly aware of the intensifying rebellion by workers against the unions' stranglehold across the world, exemplified by the struggles of auto workers and teachers in the United States and parts and electronics workers in maquiladora factories in Matamoros, Mexico, who launched wildcat strikes earlier this year.

They are anticipating the emergence of similar developments in Australia where workers, like their counterparts internationally, are beginning to realise the urgent need to break out of the unions' straightjacket if they are to take a single step forward to combat the ever deepening corporate offensive. Under these conditions, the unions are hoping that mergers will provide them with the apparatus to better suppress the eruption of any movement outside of the union- controlled framework.

Fears of a working-class revolt are shared by major sections of big business that also see the need for a stronger union industrial police force as a means to derail such developments. These concerns have been heightened by the deepening political crisis wracking the Labor Party, which has been thrown into disarray after suffering a major defeat in the May 18 federal election.

Such concerns explain why not a single company registered any legal challenge in the FWC to hinder or

prevent the proposed merger.

Mergers will do nothing to change the nationalist and pro-capitalist program that has determined the development of the unions over the last three decades into the chief proponents of ensuring the "international competitiveness" of their "own" industries, directly at the expense of the workers they claim to represent.

Workers must turn to building new organisations of struggle, including independent rank-and-file committees, to unite the working class in a common industrial and political fight against the union-backed corporate offensive.

These must be based on a new political perspective aimed at the establishment of a workers' government to implement socialist policies, including placing all vital services, industries and utilities under public ownership and democratic workers' control.



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