

Australian union prepares to shut down struggle by locked-out Coles workers

Our correspondents
16 December 2020

Despite widespread support for the 350 warehouse workers locked out by the Coles supermarket chain at Smeaton Grange in southwestern Sydney, the United Workers Union (UWU) and Labor Party leaders are moving to shut down the dispute and reach a deal with the company.

Yesterday, the UWU conducted a video-filmed vote by the locked-out workers to accept Coles's previously-rejected "offer" of a 3.5 percent pay rise. This would be part of a settlement to allow the closure of the facility in 2023 and the destruction of most of their jobs to make way for an automated warehouse.

By pushing workers to agree to the company's paltry wage increase, the UWU underscored its determination to strike a bargain with Coles as soon as possible. The UWU Facebook page showed a union representative calling for a vote "to show good faith to Coles" and prove that "this dispute is not about a measly 3.5 percent pay increase." He said the vote was a "call on Coles to come to the table with everything else we have been discussing."

Just weeks before Christmas, Coles brutally locked the workers out for at least three months when they began a 24-hour strike on November 19 after rejecting an enterprise agreement offer from management. The workers demanded the right to transfer to the new warehouse, five weeks' pay for each year of service capped at two years' pay if they are terminated, and a 5.5 percent wage rise. Coles offered just four weeks' pay per year of service and a 3.5 percent pay increase.

Another sign of the UWU's preparations to end the dispute came when it invited Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese to address the media at the lockout picket line yesterday. Albanese said he had told Coles management that its decision to lock out workers over Christmas was "a disgrace" and urged the company to

negotiate with the union.

Albanese represents the party that imposed the country's "Fair Work" anti-strike laws, in partnership with the trade unions, when it was last in office from 2007 to 2013, and which has formed a virtual de facto coalition with the Liberal-National government during the COVID-19 pandemic, bailing out big business while workers' jobs, wages and conditions have been further gutted.

Last Saturday, the UWU organised a rally and march in downtown Sydney which was attended by up to 350 people. There too, union officials pleaded for talks with Coles. UWU national president Jo-anne Schofield said: "We demand nothing more than assurances by Coles that everybody will be treated fairly."

An online petition, created by the union, has received more than 6,500 signatures. Addressed to Coles CEO Steven Cain, it asks for "a fair redundancy package," the right of transfer to the new facility and job security for "long-term casuals." Such pleas always fall on deaf ears.

Likewise, Michelle O'Neil and Sally McManus, the president and secretary of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), posted a short video on the UWU Facebook page on December 5. O'Neil said the "whole of the union movement is standing with you," but neither union bureaucrat called for any action by workers or promised to do anything. The Facebook post only called for people to contribute to a crowd funding campaign and boycott Coles stores.

Coles and its main rival Woolworths, which between them control some 80 percent of the supermarket market in Australia, are both seeking to match the super-exploitative warehousing techniques used by Amazon and other global retailers. They are shutting down their existing facilities, like Smeaton Grange, and

eliminating hundreds of jobs to open new operations to supply their supermarkets.

Backed by the ACTU and the Labor Party, the UWU, a supposed “super-union” that claims 150,000 members, has blocked any unified struggle by the tens of thousands of warehouse workers nationally against this offensive. In July-August, the UWU isolated and sold out 550 workers who were locked out at Woolworths’ distribution warehouse at Wyong, north of Sydney, after holding a 24-hour stoppage.

The UWU already has accepted the conditions being offered by Coles at its other distribution centres, including the planned closure of the Goulburn facility, near Canberra. Just like its betrayal of its members at Woolworths in Wyong, the union will resume closed-doors talks with Coles as soon as it can to work out a deal to satisfy the company’s requirements.

WSWS correspondents interviewed a number of workers at last Saturday’s rally about their fight and their working conditions. **Sharon** said they were trying to get the best redundancy packages for workers who had been with Coles for up to 38 years.

Reflecting the unions’ instructions that workers must not take wider industrial action, Sharon said workers at other distribution centres could not strike because that would breach their enterprise agreements. She condemned the Fair Work laws, which also permit companies to lock out workers if they take any industrial action.

“We have to give them [the employers] notice of one 24-hour strike but they can just lock us out of our workplace. I don’t understand how, by law, they can just lock us out for three months with no pay.”

Sharon also denounced the mass media. “We get no coverage from news or anything because of the big corporations, and all the donations they pay. They get time to tell the wrong story. We’ve got to come out to the community to let them know what is going on.”

Rob said the Fair Work laws “support the corporations and the conglomerates over the working class Australians.” He said workers had to put pressure on the big corporations, “to accept the fact that they can’t treat us workers like that.”

At the picket line last Sunday, workers told the WSWS that they pick packages of between 5 and 15 tonnes per day. A female worker aged 67 said she works 10 hours per day. Two workers reported that a

colleague at a nearby pop-up centre was pinned under a palette recently. The worker was hospitalised, yet WorkCover, the state workplace health and safety regulator, was not called, and the incident was not reported in the media.

The workers said they had suffered hernias from their work at Coles but had been refused compensation because the company claimed the injuries were due to pre-existing conditions.

One worker, who has three children aged 16 to 21, had been working at Coles for 10 years. He used to work in manufacturing but said such jobs were now all but gone, and was concerned about his children's future. He said that a lot of people had injuries from doing twisting movements during work. He agreed that an industry-wide struggle was needed.

In order to prevent another union sellout, the Coles workers need to form rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the union-Labor party machine. Such committees would turn to other sections of the working class as part of the struggle for a workers’ government and socialist policies that would place Coles and other major corporations under public ownership and democratic workers’ control.

We appeal to workers who want to discuss taking forward this fight to contact the Socialist Equality Party at: sep@sep.org.au.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact