Australian “National Day of Action” a farce as union prepares to sell out Coles workers

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Despite declaring December 17 a “National Day of Action” in support of locked-out Coles distribution centre workers, the United Workers Union (UWU) is preparing a sell-out deal with management.

The 350 warehouse workers at the major supermarket chain’s Smeaton Grange Distribution Centre in southwestern Sydney were locked out by Coles after they began a 24-hour strike on November 19.

The workers rejected a proposed enterprise agreement, which offered a 3.5 percent pay increase, and a payout of four weeks’ pay per year of service if they are terminated. The warehouse is set to be shut down in 2023 and replaced by an automated facility, meaning the destruction of most of their jobs.

The “National Day of Action” amounted to nothing more than a media stunt. No effort was made to broaden the struggle to include workers in other distribution centres. The main orientation of the campaign was to protest outside some Coles supermarkets.

While workers were led through a chorus of insipid slogans in inner-city shopping centres, UWU organiser Sharon Eurlings illustrated the retreat being orchestrated by the union.

In a video filmed at Sydney’s Martin Place, Eurlings said: “We’ve accepted the 3.5 [percent], and we know that’s more than enough.” All the workers want is “a fair redundancy and a chance to go into automated sheds.”

In fact, the locked-out workers initially demanded a 5.5 percent pay rise in addition to the right to continued employment at the new facility, and five weeks’ pay per year of service (up to a maximum of two years’ pay) if made redundant.

A vote to accept the 3.5 percent increase was taken on the urging of UWU bureaucrats, who insisted workers needed “to show good faith to Coles” to persuade the company to “come to the table.”

As workers on the picket outside the Smeaton Grange facility on Thursday told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “both sides are holding their breath, but workers can’t outlast a multinational company.”

The workers believed that Coles was determined to hold out because it is replacing its major distribution centres with automated plants in the coming years, and Smeaton Grange workers were “guinea pigs.”

The workers said that although they were relatively young and believed they would find other work if they are terminated by Coles, the same restructuring processes were in force throughout the industry. As a result, they expected they would likely find themselves in the same position in “five or ten years.”

By contrast, the UWU has portrayed the plight of the workers as the result of the malevolence of a single company. As part of the “National Day of Action,” shoppers in Brisbane were told, “the best thing you can do to support [the locked-out workers] is to shop at Woolies.”

The union’s call for a boycott of Coles supermarkets—and, inevitably, the support of competing chain Woolworths—is a political dead end. Workers cannot wage a struggle for their livelihoods by trying to pit one multinational corporation against another.

Less than five months ago, more than 550 workers at a Woolworths distribution centre at Wyong, about 90 kilometres north of Sydney, were locked out after going on strike on July 24.

Workers at Wyong, angered by dangerous conditions at the warehouse, including soaring pick rates and the lack of COVID-19 safety measures, were demanding wage parity with Sydney workers.

As the UWU is preparing to do at Smeaton Grange,

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the union brokered a sellout at Wyong workers—a deal with which Woolworths chief supply chain officer Paul Graham said the company "was happy." Under the agreement accepted by the UWU, workers were to receive a 3.7 annual percent pay rise, far short of what would be required to bring their pay into line with their counterparts in Sydney.

This collaboration of the UWU with Coles and Woolworths is entirely in keeping with the role of all the unions as industrial police forces of management.

While professing to "stand with" workers, the unions isolate them, and suppress any effort to build a genuine movement of the working class. This orientation was clearly in evidence at the Smeaton Grange site on Thursday.

Patricia Fernandez, secretary/treasurer of the New South Wales branch of the Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union, intervened to prevent workers from speaking to WSWS reporters. Absurdly, Fernandez justified this violation of the workers' democratic rights by quoting an earlier WSWS article, which stated: "UWU officials directed workers not to discuss anything with the WSWS."

Fernandez did not deny any of the contents of the article, which outlined the UWU's record of selling out workers. Instead, along with another AMIEU representative who did not give his name, she branded one WSWS reporter a "capitalist" because he owned a car.

The unnamed AMIEU organiser blurted out the divisive nationalism of the unions, which oppose any unified fight by workers against global capitalism. He told the WSWS: "I don't care what happens overseas; only Australians are going to fight for Australian workers."

When asked why the unions support the Labor Party, which enacted the "Fair Work" legislation outlawing almost all industrial action, he tried to evade the question. "We don't support everything the Labor Party does, we make propositions to the Labor Party," he said.

In reality, the unions worked hand-in-glove with Labor to draft the anti-strike laws under the Hawke and Keating governments of 1983 to 1996, and the Rudd and Gillard governments of 2007 to 2013, and use the laws to oppose any industrial action, except in isolated workplaces during union-controlled "enterprise bargaining."

These bitter decades-long experiences show that 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 for a united fight against the corporate offensive.

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:

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