

United Workers Union organises return to work at Hanes warehouse in Australia

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After five days of strike action, workers at the Hanes Australasian warehouse in Truganina, in the western suburbs of Melbourne, voted last week to accept a United Workers Union (UWU)-brokered enterprise agreement with the company.

Hanes Australasia, which distributes Bonds, Champion and Sheridan products, operates throughout Australia, New Zealand, China, Indonesia and the United Kingdom, with 4,400 employees.

Several hundred workers had struck after rejecting the company's initial offer that would have cut wages and worsened conditions. They also sought to fight the further casualisation of the workforce at the warehouse where less than half of employees have permanent jobs.

The dispute erupted during the ongoing three-month lockout of 350 warehouse workers by the Coles supermarket chain at Smeaton Grange in Sydney, but the UWU, which claims 150,000 members nationwide, called no unified fight by warehouse workers to back the Coles and Hanes workers.

On its Facebook page, the UWU claimed: "HANES WORKERS WIN!" It said: "Workers have guaranteed all permanent jobs on site will be maintained, stopped the company tearing away their conditions, won a fair pay rise and a \$2,000 pay rise."

However, the union provided no details about the new agreement. Several workers told the WSWs that the enterprise agreement would last for two years. It involved a \$2,000 payment for 2021, and then a meagre 2 percent wage increase for the next year.

The last two union agreements struck with Hanes, from 2017 and 2014, permitted the casualisation of the workforce, and the latest "victory" only maintains the current low level of permanent jobs.

The previous agreements placed no limits on casual employment. They simply required the company to

notify the union of "major changes in the composition, operation or size of the Employer's workforce or in the skills required," which could include the introduction of casuals.

As well as the Hanes and Coles conflicts, the UWU has been involved in several disputes covering warehouse workers this year. In every case, the pattern is the same: the union has opposed any unified industrial action, imposed a sell-out deal and then proclaimed a victory.

Like Amazon, the major companies are planning automated plants, destroying thousands of jobs. Both Coles and its chief supermarket rival Woolworths have become increasingly aggressive, employing lockouts to intimidate workers.

In July, 550 workers at the Woolworths distribution centre at Wyong, north of Sydney, were locked out for four days after striking for 24 hours during five-month long negotiations for a new agreement.

The UWU negotiated a sell-out deal that jettisoned the workers' initial demands, while claiming a victory, "inspiring all workers to not just have to accept whatever scraps are tossed their way." The workers' pay demands were dropped and the level of casualisation was maintained, with Woolworths permitted to hire more casuals in busy periods.

The Woolworths agreement said the company must have "sufficient flexibility to meet fluctuations in business needs." Woolworths would "undertake to work towards achieving a core work force of 80 percent permanent labour hours and 20 percent casual labour hours," but this would "not apply during peak trading periods."

Woolworths is closing its distribution centres at Minchinbury and Yenora in Sydney, as well as the Mulgrave facility in Melbourne, and planning a more

automated national distribution centre at Moorebank in Sydney. Coles has similar plans.

The UWU has opposed none of the closures. On the contrary, it has accepted the job losses and confined workers to seeking redundancy and redeployment packages. It is currently seeking to shut down the Coles workers' struggle, having already prevailed upon them to accept the company's initial pay offer.

Hanes, Coles and Woolworths are all restructuring their operations in order to match the kind of exploitation of workers by Amazon. The automation of warehouses under capitalism means throwing many more workers into unemployment whilst securing super-profits for the wealthy elite.

To fight this offensive, workers need to break out of the straitjacket of the pro-capitalist trade unions, such as the UWU, and build rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the unions, to conduct a genuine industrial and political struggle for decent, full-time jobs and higher pay.

Automation should enable workers to work in a safer environment and significantly reduce the length of the workday. But this can be achieved only if society is fundamentally transformed as part of a struggle for a workers' government and socialist policies that would place Hanes, Coles and Woolworths and other major corporations, including the banks, 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