

Jacobin publishes whitewash of union sell-out bid at Australian warehouse

Jack Turner, Peter Symonds
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Jacobin, a US-based pseudo-left magazine and web site, published an article last Saturday by Lauren Kelly, a policy adviser to the Australian United Workers Union (UWU) bureaucracy, entitled “The Coles Warehouse lockout is a front-line struggle in the battle over automation.”

The article is a shameless whitewash of the role of the UWU, and the trade unions more generally, in facilitating the destruction of jobs, the undermining of hard-won conditions and the widespread exploitation of casual labour. It is another sign of the UWU’s preparations to impose a sell-out deal on 350 locked-out Coles warehouse workers at Smeaton Grange in southwestern Sydney.

It is unusual that an American publication should publish a lengthy article on an industrial dispute in Sydney—one that is barely known in Australia due to the lack of media coverage. *Jacobin* is closely linked to the Democratic Socialists of America, which backs President-elect Joe Biden. The attention paid to the struggle is a symptom of unease in ruling circles—in Canberra and Washington—about mounting class tensions and the potential for explosive social unrest in an important US ally.

The Coles workers have been locked out since mid-November after initiating strike action in opposition to the supermarket chain’s plan to shut the warehouse and replace it with a new “smart” facility operated largely by casual labour. Management has refused to guarantee that the workers can take any of the estimated 50–100 jobs in the proposed automated operation.

The dispute at Smeaton Grange is of strategic importance for the restructuring of the logistics and supply chain industries of Australian capitalism. Measures established by Amazon internationally—involving the extreme exploitation of factory workers through high-tech monitoring and automation—are being rolled out, with Smeaton Grange as a test case.

Kelly’s thoroughly dishonest article is remarkable for its lack of any direct mention of the role of the UWU, or indeed of any trade union. It is as if the workers are simply subjected to the irresistible force of management and the demands of automation. It is assumed throughout the article that the closure and the loss of jobs are inevitable.

However, reading between the lines, when Kelly speaks of “the workers” and “they” she is in fact referring to the UWU bureaucrats for whom she functions as an apologist. As far as “they” are concerned, it is impossible to fight to defend jobs—the most that can be expected is a handful of jobs in the new warehouse and a redundancy payout for the rest.

The UWU is playing the same filthy role that the unions have carried out over and over again during the past three decades—working hand-in-hand with management to ensure an “orderly closure,” in other words, no fight to defend jobs. The trade unions have presided over the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs, including entire industries such as the car industry, which no longer exists in Australia.

The National Union of Workers (NUW), the predecessor to the UWU, presided over the destruction of jobs and conditions at a Woolworths warehouse in Broadmeadows in Melbourne that ultimately led to its closure in 2018 and replacement by an automated and casualised facility. No fight was taken up by the union to prevent the closure and save jobs. Woolworths is the major supermarket rival to Coles.

The union’s betrayals are not limited to closures. In July this year, the UWU isolated 550 Woolworths workers in Wyong, 100 kilometres north of Sydney. The workers struck for 24 hours to demand COVID safety measures and a 16 percent wage increase over three years to bring their pay in line with Sydney workers. In response, Woolworths locked them out.

The UWU, which claims over 150,000 members, organised no strike action in their support, and, after closed-door negotiations with management, pushed through a sell-out deal involving a 3.7 percent annual wage increase. Management declared it was “happy.”

In every one of these disputes, the UWU has deliberately kept the workers isolated. Locked-out workers at Smeaton Grange are being told that it is impossible for other Coles warehouses to take strike action, let alone those of Woolworths or other sections of workers, because that would breach industrial relations laws and risk huge fines. Yet it was a Labor government—with the full agreement of the entire union apparatus—that imposed the current legislation, which outlaws any industrial action outside a bargaining period and bars any supportive strikes.

Kelly, of course, makes no mention of these bitter experiences of workers. She writes in general of falling strike rates and rises in militant employer action as if they were tendencies akin to the law of gravity—ubiquitous and inevitable. But it was the trade unions, in their collaboration with the Hawke and Keating Labor governments between 1983 and 1996, that were responsible for the suppression of strikes, the smashing of militant sections of the working class and the imposition of enterprise bargaining.

Kelly cites the 2011 Qantas dispute as a favourable exception to the crushing impact of lockouts. “Qantas CEO Alan Joyce took the unprecedented move of grounding planes and locking domestic workers out amid ongoing industrial action. Within two days, the federal government had intervened to end the lockout,” she declares.

However, the Gillard Labor government intervened on behalf of Qantas, not the workers. Gillard used the Fair Work Australia (FWA) tribunal, established two years earlier by the Labor government, to ban all strike action by Qantas workers and force the dispute into arbitration by FWA. The result was a restructuring process that eliminated 10 percent of the 36,000-strong Qantas workforce—enforced by the unions.

It is not inevitable that automation leads to the destruction of jobs and conditions. Nor is it impossible for the working class to challenge and overturn the straitjacket of industrial legislation and the FWA. What is impossible is that the trade unions, which function as the industrial police for management and governments, will lead such a fight.

If locked-out Coles workers at Smeaton Grange are kept

isolated by the UWU, their jobs and conditions will be destroyed. The only alternative is to establish a rank-and-file committee of democratically-elected trusted representatives to fight to defend all jobs and conditions. Such a committee would have to turn for support to other sections of workers—in Australia and internationally—in the first instance to other warehouse workers and more broadly to other sections of the working class facing similar attacks.

Such a struggle would be political from the outset as workers would confront not only management, but governments, the establishment media, the industrial courts... and the unions. It would have to raise the demand for the abolition of FWA and the repeal of the industrial legislation and call for the support of all sections of the working class.

A storm of denunciation would erupt in the big business media, accusing workers of opposing “progress” by resisting automation. It is not automation that is the problem, but who controls it and whose interests it serves. Under capitalism, automation is the means for cutting labour costs and driving up profits. Automation, however, should serve to lighten the load of workers—fewer hours and less onerous work on the same pay.

Under socialism, in which the major corporations such as Coles and Woolworths were placed under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class, workers would be more than capable of organising production to provide a decent standard of living for all. The working day could be shortened, enabling workers to pursue leisure and cultural activities during the week. Advanced automation could be used to reduce or eliminate workplace injuries. The increase in productivity would mean workers could retire earlier, before their bodies were broken by decades of hard labour.

The answer to the apologists of capitalist class and its trade union servants such as Kelly is to campaign for a workers’ government and socialist policies. The Socialist Equality Party encourages Coles workers to contact us to discuss this political perspective and will provide its support for any initiative to defend their jobs and livelihoods.



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