

Australia: Locked-out Coles workers in Sydney confront a choice

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Workers at the Smeaton Grange warehouse of supermarket giant Coles have been locked out for nearly two months and left isolated by the United Workers Union (UWU). Unless they begin to take matters into their own hands, form a rank-and-file committee independent of the union and launch a political and industrial fight for jobs and conditions, they will be forced to accept whatever terms the company imposes.

The entire record of the UWU in this dispute, and in countless others, has been to wear down and demoralise workers and block any genuine struggle to mobilise other sections of the working class to defend jobs and conditions. The union's abuse and threats against Socialist Equality Party campaigners is precisely because the SEP has outlined an alternative that cuts across the UWU's plan for a "just transition"—that is the closure of the warehouse in 2023 and the destruction of most, if not all, of the jobs.

Coles announced a three-month lockout on November 19, after the UWU called a 24-hour strike at the facility and threatened unspecified "rolling action." The union had been in closed-door negotiations with Coles for months prior to the dispute.

The token stoppage was only called after workers rejected an enterprise agreement offer from Coles, which included a 3.5 percent per annum wage rise and redundancy provisions equating to a maximum of 52-weeks pay for workers who accepted a package and 82 weeks for those who were sacked.

The UWU has claimed to oppose those conditions, but its differences with management are marginal. Instead of a 3.5 percent pay rise, the union initially asked for 5.5 percent. Rather than 82-weeks pay for redundancies, it called for 104.

But on the major issues, the union and management are at one. The UWU has accepted, from the outset, Coles planned closure of the Smeaton Grange warehouse, which is set to be replaced by an automated facility in 2023.

The union has called for a few of the workers to be given the "opportunity" to redeploy to the new warehouse, and for those who are sacked to be treated with "respect."

The UWU's blather about a "just transition" to greater automation is drawn from the playbook of the unions that covered the car industry and other sectors that have been shut down or subjected to mass sackings. In every instance, such a "transition" has involved workers being thrown on the scrapheap, or forced to accept employment on conditions even poorer than they currently face.

The program of the UWU, in other words, is for job cuts and an "orderly closure" of Smeaton Grange at workers' expense. Everything the union has done since the lockout began has been aimed at wearing down the Coles employees and compelling them to accept the permanent shutdown of the facility, without any struggle.

This was underscored by the most recent UWU statement on December 22, which begged Coles management to reopen the Smeaton Grange warehouse and to resume closed-door negotiations with union officials. "Workers are ready to get back to work to provide Sydney with the supplies it will need, but have been locked out by the company since November," the statement complained.

Days earlier, on December 16, the union pushed through a vote among workers to accept the company's miserly 3.5 percent per annum wage increase, with UWU officials declaring that this was a "show of good faith to Coles."

The union held a phony "day of action" to ram through this wretched manoeuvre, at which it provided Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese with a platform to posture as a defender of the Coles workers. He effectively accepted the rationale for job cuts, declaring, "We all know technical change can displace workers," but that "we need to make sure workers are looked after." Labor is one of the two parties of big business and has been at the forefront of the offensive against jobs, wages and conditions for the past four decades.

Since December 22, there has been a radio silence from the UWU. Workers have told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the union has provided them with no updates on the dispute.

At the same time, it has ruled out any joint action with

workers at other Coles facilities or at its major competitor Woolworths. The UWU is ensuring that production continues throughout Coles warehouses and supermarkets, meaning that the Smeaton Grange dispute is having no impact on the corporation's profits or operations.

Coles had told the union, prior to the lockout, that if any industrial action were undertaken at Smeaton Grange, it would simply shut the facility for three months and shift operations elsewhere. This is precisely what has happened, without the slightest opposition from the union. "Temporary" warehouses, reportedly staffed by casuals, are running without hindrance in western Sydney. Instead, the UWU has established a pathetic "community picket" outside the closed Smeaton Grange facility.

The primary "action" of the UWU and its allies has been to promote a "community boycott" of Coles. Aside from being utterly ineffectual, this amounts to a promotion of Woolworths, under conditions of an effective duopoly in the supermarket sector.

Woolworths, however, has done exactly the same thing as Coles, announcing mid-last year that it will slash 1,350 jobs by shuttering existing warehouses and establishing an automated facility. When 550 workers at the company's factory in Wyong, on the New South Wales Central Coast, went on strike in late July, Woolworths responded with an indefinite lockout, setting the blueprint that was followed by Coles at Smeaton Grange.

Woolworths lifted the lockout after a week, when the UWU signed a sell-out enterprise agreement which accepts the eventual closure of the Wyong warehouse, provides a wage increase of just 3.7 percent per annum, and does nothing to address grueling pick rates.

This is what the UWU has in store for Smeaton Grange. Either it will strike another pro-company enterprise agreement, or workers will be compelled to return on management's terms when the lockout expires on February 11. The only concern of the union is that it does not have coverage of the temporary facilities, depriving it of dues-paying members and a seat at the negotiating table, from which the bureaucrats derive their privileges.

Meanwhile, workers are literally being starved out. They have not been provided with any strike pay by the UWU. Instead, the union has launched an online crowdfund, which has raised \$68,000. Even if disbursed, this would equate to a one-off payment of around \$170 per worker. The lack of financial assistance has compelled many of the workers to look for alternative employment, potentially providing Coles with many of the job cuts that it is seeking.

Workers confront a choice between two roads. The job-cutting agenda of the UWU is clear.

The alternative is the perspective advanced by the Socialist

Equality Party for a genuine fight of workers at Smeaton Grange, Coles, Woolworths and throughout the sector, in defence of all jobs, conditions and for decent wages.

Because the union is hostile to any struggle, it has sought to prevent workers at the Smeaton Grange picket from speaking with SEP campaigners. Workers should reject these attempts at political censorship and intimidation with contempt.

But they must go further. The entire pro-business record of the UWU, its predecessors and all of the unions, shows that new organisations of struggle are required. Independent rank and file committees are needed at Smeaton Grange and throughout the supermarket sector. These would break the isolation imposed by the unions, reaching out to other sections of workers and coordinating a genuine political and industrial counter-offensive against the company-union attacks.

This is a political fight. Any action will immediately come up against not only Coles and Woolworths, but also the big business media, the courts, the unions, Labor and the political establishment as a whole. The threat of legal action and massive fines—under legislation enacted by the Rudd Labor government with the backing of all the unions—will be used to try to intimidate and bludgeon workers back to work.

To defeat these forces requires a movement of the working class directed against the existing social and political order. Workers threatened with legal action should appeal for the working class as a whole to come to their support and challenge the "right" of the capitalist courts to ride roughshod over the democratic rights of workers to defend their class interests.

This means the struggle for a workers' government that would implement socialist policies, including placing Coles, Woolworths, the major corporations and banks under public ownership and democratic workers' control. A socialist society would use automation to shorten the working day, and ensure less onerous and safer conditions, rather than destroy livelihoods in the pursuit of greater profits.

We encourage workers to contact the SEP to discuss this perspective at sep@sep.org.au



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact