

Australia: Locked-out Coles workers reject company “offer” as union declares its “neutrality”

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Some 350 Coles workers who have been locked out of the supermarket giant’s Smeaton Grange warehouse in Sydney rejected an enterprise agreement proposed by the company in an online ballot last Friday.

The vote, which is the fifth time a version of the agreement has been blocked, demonstrates workers’ hostility to the scheduled closure of the warehouse in 2023, and Coles’ attempts to attack wages and conditions in the meantime.

But the ballot again demonstrates that a genuine political and industrial fight to defend jobs and conditions requires a rebellion against the United Workers Union (UWU), which functions as a police force of management.

Having isolated the locked-out workers for the past two months and signalled its willingness to enforce company attacks, the union declared that it was taking a “neutral” position on Coles’ regressive enterprise agreement.

In the context of a yes/no ballot, this was clearly a tacit endorsement of the offer, aimed at placing maximum pressure on workers to accede to company demands. The cynical posture of impartiality was aimed at absolving the union of responsibility for the consequences of a “yes” vote, even as it sought to ensure that this was the outcome.

In the weeks leading up to the ballot, the UWU did everything it could to create the conditions for a return to work on company terms.

From the outset of the dispute, the union declared its acceptance of the closure of the Smeaton Grange warehouse and the destruction of workers’ jobs. The UWU’s sole concern since has been to ensure its position at the negotiating table, with officials repeatedly begging Coles for a resumption of talks, and to cover-up its enforcement of the slated closure with blather about a

“just transition to automation.”

In mid-December, the union declared that it was abandoning its earlier calls for an annual pay increase of 5.5 percent and accepting the company’s original offer of 3.5 percent, only marginally above the rate of inflation. This, UWU officials insisted, was necessary as a “sign of good faith to Coles.”

The union organised a phony “day of action” and provided a platform for Labor leader Anthony Albanese to posture as a defender of the Coles workers. Albanese was brought in to ramp up the pressure on workers to accept the reduced wage claim. The union, moreover, was identifying itself with one of the two parties of big business, which has overseen a decades-long onslaught on jobs, wages and conditions that Coles is merely continuing.

Then on December 22, the UWU issued a statement pleading for management to end the lock-out. “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 when negotiations for improved redundancy for workers facing automation broke down,” it declared.

This was a clear signal to the company that the UWU would seek to enforce a return to work on management terms.

The outcome is that more than two months into the lock-out workers are faced with the same rotten agreement that they voted down in November, with the union now openly seeking to ram it through.

In its earlier public statements, the union had called only for Coles to sweeten the job destruction by increasing redundancy payments and providing a worthless guarantee that some workers from Smeaton Grange will have the “opportunity” to redeploy to the new automated

facility.

The union had asked for redundancy payments, which Coles proposed would amount to four weeks' pay a year capped at 52 weeks, to be lifted to five weeks a year capped at 104 weeks. The UWU's tacit support for the latest version of the agreement, which does not provide for the increased redundancy provision, shows that it has effectively ditched even this demand.

Moreover there is no offer of redeployment in the deal. The UWU is well aware that Coles wants to clear out the old permanent workforce and replace them with casuals who can be forced to accept poverty-level wages and "gig economy" conditions. Coles declared that the deal provides for an 80 percent-20 percent ratio of permanent to casual staff, but the agreement only covers Smeaton Grange and not the new automated facility.

Other aspects of the offer show that after two months of workers being hung out to dry by the union, Coles is in a stronger position than at the beginning of the lockdown.

The latest version of the agreement includes a clause that provides for expanded disciplinary measures that could be used against workers who have taken part in protests and have opposed the job cuts. Workers can be given a "first and final warning" if they are accused of broadly-defined violations, raising the prospect of forced sackings as soon as the lockdown is ended.

The UWU, moreover, has assisted Coles in its aim of destroying the 350 jobs through "voluntary" redundancies. The union has refused to provide strike pay to the locked out workers. Instead, it established an online fundraiser which has so far garnered \$70,000. If distributed evenly, this would amount to a one-off payment of \$200 to workers who have not received wages for more than two months.

The consequence is that the locked out staff have been forced to look for work elsewhere. Coles is seeking to take advantage of this. An article in the *Australian Financial Review* reported that Coles will "allow up to 80 employees to take voluntary redundancy before the end of June, under the 52 weeks' pay cap, in response to workers' desire to leave before the site shuts down."

Meanwhile, the UWU has ensured that Coles' operations have continued unhindered throughout the lock-out. It has not taken any action at other Coles warehouses that it covers, or at the facilities of its competitor Woolworths, which is also slashing hundreds of jobs. The union has maintained an ineffectual "community picket" outside the closed Smeaton Grange warehouse, while Coles has shifted production to temporary facilities

elsewhere in western Sydney.

Fearful that the pro-company role of the UWU is so nakedly exposed, the pseudo-left Solidarity group has stepped in as a loyal opposition to the union leadership, establishing what it calls "Concerned Workers Smeaton Grange." Solidarity has bemoaned the UWU leadership's isolation of the workers and declared its "astonishment" that the union took a "neutral" position on the company offer.

But the entire purpose of Solidarity's activities is to promote the fraud that the UWU can be pressured to take more "militant" action. In its articles, moreover, Solidarity has echoed the union leadership's calls for "improved redundancy," signalling its acceptance of the closure. It has complained that the union has been shut out of negotiations, warning that this creates a precedent for "non-union agreements."

All of this is aimed at preventing workers from taking the only step that will prevent the job destruction and the assault on conditions. That is, a complete break with the UWU and the establishment of new organisations of struggle, including independent rank-and-file committees.

These would be tasked with coordinating a genuine industrial and political fight to defeat the closure and to defend all jobs. They would fight to break the isolation imposed by the unions, by appealing for joint action with workers throughout Coles, Woolworths and the entire warehousing and supermarket sector.

Workers are in a political fight against not only Coles, but the union, the big business media, Labor, the government and the courts. All of them will use the threat of massive fines and criminal prosecution under Fair Work legislation established by the Rudd Labor government to suppress industrial and political action.

This can only be defeated by a political movement of the entire working class, directed against the onslaught on jobs, wages and conditions that is being imposed across the board as workers are made to pay for the deepening crisis of the capitalist system. Such a movement must be based on a socialist perspective, aimed at placing Coles, Woolworths, the major corporations, and the banks under public ownership and democratic workers' control.



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