

Australia: Reject union sell-out of Smeaton Grange Coles workers!

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Workers must reject a sell-out agreement struck between the United Workers Union (UWU) and Coles, covering 350 employees at the supermarket giant's Smeaton Grange warehouse in southwestern Sydney.

The deal, if it is not defeated, will allow the planned closure of the facility by 2024, the destruction of most, if not all, permanent jobs, and an offensive against pay and conditions. This would set a precedent for a stepped-up assault against workers throughout the supermarket and logistics sector, including further closures and mass sackings.

In a Facebook post yesterday afternoon, the UWU announced that it had rammed the agreement through an indicative vote of union members that concluded on Friday, 2p.m. By the union's own account, nearly 40 percent of "valid" votes opposed the betrayal. The UWU insisted that workers would return to the warehouse immediately—after a ten-week company lockout—as Coles begins its job destruction, initially through voluntary redundancies and then forced sackings.

This dictate should be dismissed with the contempt that it deserves. The UWU is declaring that the agreement is a done deal, before a legally-mandated ballot of all Smeaton Grange workers has been held. It is trying to bully workers to return, on company terms, without any opportunity to discuss the agreement or scrutinise its content.

The indicative union ballot was an anti-democratic farce, resembling elections held under dictatorships, where voters are effectively given only one "choice."

Workers were told, with virtually no notice, that the vote was to be held. In a Facebook group for Smeaton Grange workers, a post, made less than an hour-and-a-half before the poll was set to close, advised workers to contact a union representative if they did not yet have the link to vote. Some workers said they feared their vote would not be counted, because of technical issues.

According to the figures provided by the union, 255 "valid votes" were counted from 359 ballots. More than 100 votes were discounted as "duplicates," and two were thrown out due to "invalid IDs." The union claimed that 156 of the ballots deemed legitimate were "yes" votes, accounting for 61 percent, with 96 "no" votes, or 38 percent. Because it was an in-house ballot organised by the UWU, there is no way of confirming the bona fides of these figures.

In any case, the union presented workers with an agreement that was virtually identical to ones that they had voted down on six previous occasions, including in a company-organised ballot only a week earlier.

In the January 15 company ballot, the UWU declared that it had a "neutral" position, in order to place maximum pressure on workers to ratify the deal. When that was rejected, despite the efforts of the union, UWU officials reportedly requested closed-door talks with Coles management. They then told workers that they would have to vote again, this time in a union-organised poll.

In other words, yesterday's ballot was an attempt to nullify the results of a vote of all Smeaton Grange workers, held just a week before. The message from the union was: you will keep voting until we get the result that we and management want.

This anti-democratic operation was the culmination of a two-month campaign by the UWU to wear down workers until they acceded to company demands. Throughout the lockout, the union has isolated the workers, refusing to take any action at other warehouses operated by Coles and its chief competitor Woolworths, thus ensuring that there has been no disruption to the activities of the multi-billion dollar corporations.

At the same time, the union has sought to starve workers out by refusing to provide any strike pay. The UWU, which claims 150,000 dues-paying members across the country, instead organised an online fundraiser

that would amount to a one-off payment of roughly \$200 to workers, who have not received a wage for ten weeks.

The UWU's chief concern throughout has been to cover-up its role in the planned job destruction, and to ensure its own seat at the bargaining table, where it trades workers' jobs, wages and conditions in exchange for the privileges of union officialdom.

The contents of the deal, as reported by the UWU, confirm that it is a police force of management seeking to enforce an "orderly closure" of Smeaton Grange.

In its Facebook post announcing the result of the ballot, the UWU reported that it had secured "a minimum number of 50 Voluntary Redundancies, which can go up to 80, with a process that starts from today's date." This will assist Coles' aim of getting rid of the existing workforce as quickly as possible.

The union has claimed to be fighting for "fair redundancy" provisions, but the deal provides for payments equivalent to "4 weeks per year of service capped at 80 weeks." Coles offered this months ago, but the workers rejected it.

Wages are not even mentioned in the post, but the UWU dropped its initial claim of 5.5 percent rises per annum in December, accepting Coles' proposal of a paltry 3.5 percent. There would be no back pay of the wages lost during the lockout.

Other "highlights" provided by the union are equally contemptible. It stated that it had ensured an 80 percent-20 percent ratio of permanents to casuals. But that is similar to what already exists, and it would only cover Smeaton Grange, which is to be shut down.

The union said it had made sure that "outplacement services" would be mandated by the enterprise agreement. Workers would be referred to private "job providers" after they are sacked, where they might be shunted into low-paid, casual work, or left on the scrapheap.

Workers face a turning point. There is substantial opposition to the sell-out deal. But it can be defeated only through a rebellion against the UWU and the establishment of new organisations of genuine struggle.

This requires the formation of a rank-and-file committee at Smeaton Grange that is completely independent of the union, as well as at Coles, Woolworths and other warehousing facilities across the country.

The first step is to organise the widest campaign for a "no" vote in the official ballot on the Smeaton Grange agreement. But that is just the beginning. The defence of jobs requires an industrial and political counter-offensive, involving workers throughout the sector. Strikes and other

actions should be planned at all Coles facilities. The warning must go out: what is taking place at Smeaton Grange will occur at your warehouse, if we do not take up a struggle now.

This is a political fight. Any action by Coles workers will come up against not only company management and the unions, but the corporate media, the big business Labor Party and the industrial courts. All of them rely upon the Fair Work Australia legislation, imposed by the last Labor government and the unions, to intimidate workers with the threats of massive fines and imprisonment for "unauthorised" strikes and protests.

This can be defeated only by building a political movement of the working class as a whole. A powerful appeal can be made to other sections of workers, who face the same assault on jobs, wages and conditions as at Smeaton Grange, amid a crisis of world capitalism and an austerity offensive by governments and employers everywhere.

This struggle must be linked to the fight for a workers' government and socialism. None of the social rights of the working class can be defended without a frontal assault on the wealth of the corporate oligarchy, which is expanding like never before, even as workers face an unprecedented social crisis. The major corporations, including Coles and Woolworths, and the banks, must be placed under public ownership and democratic workers' control.

That is the perspective fought for by the Socialist Equality Party. We urge workers at Smeaton Grange, other Coles facilities and throughout the sector to contact us today.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact