

Australia: Coles warehouse workers in Melbourne denounce lock-out of Smeaton Grange workers and the union

Our reporters
24 January 2021

SEP members spoke with Coles warehouse workers this weekend in the outer-Melbourne suburbs of Somerton and Truganina about the ongoing lock out of 350 workers at the company's Smeaton Grange facility in south-western Sydney.

The United Workers Union (UWU), which covers Coles warehouses nationally, has isolated Smeaton Grange workers and is currently attempting to impose a job destruction sellout deal it negotiated with the company.

Coles workers voiced their support for the Smeaton Grange workers with several denouncing the UWU over its refusal to mobilise its members. Others spoke about the backbreaking conditions at their own work places. Many of them learnt of the dispute for the first time from the SEP. Their names have been changed in the following interviews.

The outer-Melbourne warehouses collectively employ over one thousand workers. The Somerton warehouse is slated for automation in five years' time, thus workers will face the same threat to their jobs as at Smeaton Grange.

Workers at Coles' Laverton Chilled Distribution Centres in Truganina stopped work in March 2020 over the lack of safe working procedures during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. They previously walked out in Enterprise Bargaining Agreement dispute in July 2016.

Up to 600 Somerton workers struck for two weeks in 2012 to demand wage parity with Coles warehouse workers nationally. The National Union of Workers (NUW) predecessor of the United Workers Union (UWU)—betrayed the strike without achieving wage parity.

Kevin, who has worked at the Coles warehouse for over ten years, said that he had not heard about the Smeaton Grange dispute.

“We haven't had a union meeting for six months. Many people wouldn't re-join the union after the last agreement. They weren't happy with the outcome,” he said.

“The pick rate is the main thing. In some areas there is a pick rate of 2,200 boxes per day. In other areas, like the main floor, the pick rate is 1,100 per day, with heavier boxes.

“If you are a casual and your pick rate isn't high enough, you won't get called again. If you are permanent and your pick rate isn't high enough, you won't get overtime. If you do get a high pick rate, you have to keep getting that. There are a lot of people injured here and it is in relation to the pick rate. Some of the injured people got sacked.”

Albert said, “I haven't heard anything about [Smeaton Grange]; they don't want to tell us. This is not a good thing. The company should at least pay them a decent amount. Without struggle nothing can happen—nothing can be solved—and so people should get together.

“The union should be standing up for those people. If they've been paying dues, then they should stand up for them or give all their money back. They get paid to do something; this money is not for free. The unions are the ones that should be doing something about it all. We hope the workers of Smeaton Grange win their rights. We feel for them and it may happen to us some day.”

Due to the back breaking nature of the work Coles warehouses, employees are mainly young. Some are

employed by body hire companies and placed at Coles. Others work directly for the supermarket giant as casuals, some for any number of years.

Ralph, who was on his first day of orientation as a casual worker said, “Coles is doing the wrong thing. They should look after their workers and not throw them out. It’s very wrong.”

Michelle said the Smeaton Grange lockout was “not fair because these people have been working for years and years, and that is their repayment from the company.”

Commenting on the UWU’s role, she said, “This is wrong. How do we know the same situation won’t happen to us here in Melbourne? Will we get the same treatment? Your perspective makes sense.

“If unions are not fulfilling their responsibilities to workers, if they are on the companies’ side, then we need to get rid of them. We should be given political freedom to fight. The courts should not have the right to fine us if we strike. We need a political party and, like you said, a plan. I don’t know what your plan is, but I’m interested.”

Referring to the current pick rates she said, “Some workers have told me that the EBA says that there is no pick rate but managers come round to check. I’ve been told that I have to maintain a pick rate of roughly 180 per hour. I’m casual but am new here. Quite a few people have been working here for five to six years, and are still casual. They deserve the benefits from permanent employment.”

Andy has worked as a casual for Coles since 2018. He said he knew nothing about the Smeaton Grange dispute until he read a *World Socialist Web Site* article. The issue for me, he said, is permanent employment. “I know people who have been there since 2017 and are still casuals. I want permanency.”

Ian denounced the UWU. “Honestly, those people are really corrupt. They approached me only one time to join the union and to pay \$12.50 per week, but then do nothing. I didn’t know about the [Smeaton Grange] picket because the union didn’t tell us. We’ve had only one meeting since I started in July last year.

“Working conditions are not that bad—I have a pick rate of 190 per hour for an eight-hour shift—but what I do complain about is the lack of a future. What is going to happen to our jobs? I’m a casual and I have a family and children to look after.

“The government says it has assisted companies [with JobKeeper] to give permanent positions but this isn’t happening. I’m paying the union for nothing. Who defends my rights?”



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