

Australia: Union trying to ram through sell-out of Coles Smeaton Grange workers

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The United Workers Union (UWU) is doing everything it can to force Coles workers at the company's Smeaton Grange warehouse in western Sydney to accept a sell-out enterprise agreement and a return to the job on management's terms.

The union has isolated the workers over the course of a ten-week lockout, blocking calls for unified action involving employees at other facilities operated by Coles and its main competitor Woolworths. Coles workers at Melbourne sites told the WSWS they had not even been informed of the lockout. At the same time, the UWU has refused to provide strike pay, in a bid to starve workers out and wear down opposition to company demands.

Now, the union is insisting that workers have no choice but to accept an enterprise agreement, virtually identical to those that the Coles employees have already voted down on six occasions.

The deal being pushed by the UWU will facilitate the closure of Smeaton Grange, to be replaced by a new automated facility set to open by 2024, and the destruction of most, if not all, of the 350 jobs at the current site. The UWU has dropped its calls for slightly improved redundancy provisions and a marginally higher wage rise, adopting the company's demands on all key issues.

A meeting called by the union at Smeaton Grange yesterday highlighted the anti-democratic character of this operation and the UWU's role as a police force for management.

The meeting was held days after the union called an electronic ballot of its members on Coles' enterprise agreement offer last Friday. The deal was almost exactly the same as one that was voted down in a company-organised ballot only a week before.

The UWU claims to have narrowly pushed through the "offer" in Friday's vote. Despite the union's best attempts, however, almost 40 percent of workers who

voted rejected the agreement. An unusually large number of votes, numbering more than 100, were discounted as "duplicates," raising questions about the bona fides of the ballot.

In spite of this, and the fact that the union ballot was only an "indicative" vote that carries no formal weight, the UWU is presenting it as an unchallengeable ratification of the agreement. The union is using its dubious and anti-democratic ballot as a steamroller, to insist that the dispute is over and that the many workers opposed to the sell-out must accept it.

In actual fact, the agreement has not been accepted. An official ballot, which cannot be held before January 29, at least seven days after the union vote, has yet to occur. The union is seeking to undermine that ballot by presenting it as a mere formality, even though it is clear that many workers, possibly a majority, wish to reject the agreement.

At yesterday's meeting, a UWU organiser who presided made no mention of the agreement or its contents. Instead, she limited discussion entirely to the circumstances surrounding a return to work, on the basis that the dispute was over.

The organiser announced that Coles would not allow workers back onto the job until the deal had been ratified in the official vote. She said a private company would be returning machinery to the facility, and that management, not the workers, would restock it.

In other words, the UWU has tried to bludgeon workers into accepting the sell-out agreement, on the grounds that this will lift the lockout, allowing them to return to work and receive a wage for the first time in over two months. But Coles is threatening to extend the lockout by up to two weeks, even if the agreement is accepted.

This only demonstrates that the union has created the conditions where the supermarket giant feels emboldened to do whatever it likes, and to intensify its offensive against workers. It is a warning that if the sellout is

pushed through, Coles will immediately begin victimisations, which the union will facilitate.

The organiser called for votes that rejected management's role in restocking the facility and provided for the continuation of an ineffectual "community picket" outside the plant. This will do nothing to prevent Coles from imposing a return to work on its terms.

Reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party received a warm response from many workers who attended the meeting. "We're being sold out," "it's the company and the union against us," and "we're getting nothing out of this agreement," were repeated refrains.

Some workers noted that the union was moving to shut down the dispute, at precisely the point where there were demands, including at a meeting attended by more than 100 workers last week, for the establishment of an immediate strike fund.

Workers explained that many of their colleagues had been compelled to seek employment elsewhere because there had been no financial assistance from the union. Others, who had not found employment, had been forced to withdraw substantial sums from their superannuation savings, in some cases totalling up to \$20,000. One worker said his superannuation had been entirely wiped out.

Some workers said they had voted "yes" in the union ballot only because they were in dire financial straits.

A worker who spoke to the WSWS on Sunday said he had read its previous article, calling for a rejection of the sell-out. "I saw that article and I agree. Clearly the unions no longer work. We saw what happened to the retail unions and it's now happening to other unions that used to be strong.

"We were completely sold out by the union. They sent us down this path, telling us that a three-month lockout was just 'scare tactics,' that Coles would never go through with it and would want the shed operating over Christmas. Then when it happened, we were left out to dry with no support whatsoever."

The worker noted that in the company-organised ballot on January 15, the union had refused to take any position, but had tacitly endorsed the deal. "After being financially ruined, the union tells us it's 'neutral' on an unchanged offer and sends us a video 'explaining the offer' that was really just a sales pitch. It's unbelievable," he said.

The union is seeking to suppress any exposure of its sordid role and block discussion of an alternative perspective. The UWU has made only one Facebook post

about the dispute this year, announcing the results of its own ballot.

Overnight, WSWS reporters were removed from an unofficial Facebook group called "Coles Smeaton Grange Family Support lockdown 2020," without notice or explanation. Some of them had participated in it since last November.

WSWS articles opposing the sell-out had been shared in the group, and had received substantial support. Whoever carried out the censorship, it would doubtless be welcomed by the UWU leadership. Members of the group should demand the reversal of this anti-democratic decision, which has come just as the union seeks to shut down the struggle.

Workers must reject the attempts of the union to ram through the sellout agreement. The dispute is not over! If the UWU is able to impose the deal, it will open the floodgates for a stepped-up offensive throughout the warehousing and logistics sector. The Socialist Equality Party calls for the largest no vote in the upcoming formal ballot.

But this is just the beginning. What is required is a complete break with the union and the formation of independent rank-and-file committees at Smeaton Grange, other Coles and Woolworths warehouses and throughout the sector. These should organise joint action, including strikes, involving all Coles workers.

Above all, this is a political fight, directed against the big business media, the corporate elite, the government, Labor, the unions and the draconian Fair Work Australia industrial laws, which they all support. To defeat this line up requires a political movement of the entire working class, directed against the onslaught on workers' jobs, wages and conditions everywhere, amid a crisis of Australian and world capitalism. The fight must be for a workers' government that would place Coles, Woolworths and the banks and corporations under public ownership and democratic workers' control.



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