

Reject union sell-out at Coles Smeaton Grange warehouse in Sydney! Form rank-and-file committees to defend jobs and stop the closure!

The Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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Workers at Coles' warehouse at Smeaton Grange in western Sydney face a turning point. For the past ten weeks they have been isolated, denied strike pay and lied to by the United Workers Union (UWU), which has facilitated a company lock-out and sought to prevent any struggle against the company's assault on jobs, wages and conditions.

Now the UWU is trying to force through a sell-out enterprise agreement and a return to work on management terms. The UWU's deal, if it is accepted, will result in the closure of Smeaton Grange and its replacement with an automated facility, set to begin operations by 2024; the destruction of most, if not all of the 350 jobs; a paltry wage-rise after more than two months of no pay; and the inadequate redundancy provisions that were put forward by Coles early in the dispute.

The message from the union is that the multi-billion dollar company will get everything it wants, and workers, who have rejected this very agreement on six previous occasions, have no say in the matter. The UWU is brazenly presenting its rotten agreement as a done deal, in a bid to steam-roll workers into ratifying it and returning to the job.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) calls on workers to reject this sell-out, vote "no" in the official ballot that will be held on January 29 or later, and launch an independent struggle in defence of all jobs and against the closure.

The outcome of this dispute will have major consequences, not only for Coles staff at Smeaton Grange, but for the entire working class.

If the UWU and Coles are able to impose a defeat at Smeaton Grange, it will be a green-light for the major corporations and their accomplices in the unions to deepen the offensive against workers' jobs, wages and conditions everywhere.

There is already a sweeping pro-business restructuring underway in the warehousing, logistics and delivery sectors, from Coles' job-cutting offensive, to Woolworths plans to shutter facilities, and a drive to privatise Australia Post. An "orderly closure" of Smeaton Grange will set a precedent for

mass sackings across Coles, Woolworths and elsewhere.

A genuine struggle by Smeaton Grange workers against the UWU sell-out and in defence of all jobs, would have no less far-reaching ramifications. Such a fight—in a sector that is crucial to capitalist economy and the very functioning of society—would be a signal to workers everywhere that now is the time to take a stand against a decades-long race to the bottom, enforced by the unions, which is resulting in widespread unemployment, massive rates of casualisation and a social crisis in working-class areas.

There is substantial hostility among workers to the agreement and the UWU, but the question is: how can a fight be waged against Coles, a powerful corporation, which has behind it not only the union, but the big business media, Labor, the government and the industrial courts? A "no" vote in the upcoming ballot is necessary, but it is only the beginning.

In the first instance, the experiences of the past two months have demonstrated in spades that workers can only defend their interests through a complete break with the UWU. It is a police force of management that exists to suppress workers' opposition and to advance the privileges of the union officialdom. The same is the case for every other union. In addition to continually selling out the workers they falsely claim to represent, all of them have assisted the UWU in isolating Smeaton Grange workers and hanging them out to dry.

New organisations of struggle, independent of the corporatised unions and controlled by workers themselves, are required. The SEP urges workers at Smeaton Grange to form an independent rank-and-file committee to fight for a "no" vote and to organise an industrial and political campaign against the job cuts.

Such a committee would have to break the isolation imposed by the unions. Workers at Smeaton Grange need to link up with their colleagues at the Eastern Creek facility in Sydney, and at Coles' warehouses throughout the country.

Coles workers in Melbourne informed SEP campaigners last weekend that they did not even know about the Smeaton Grange dispute because the union had kept them in the dark. But when told what was going on, they recognised immediately that the situation at Smeaton Grange had major implications for them and spoke out in support of their locked-out colleagues. A powerful appeal can be made to workers everywhere: either we all take action now, or you will be next on the chopping block.

Strikes should be prepared throughout the Coles warehouse, distribution and supermarket network. Stoppages by workers in any of the company's key facilities would rapidly create a crisis for Coles and threaten to bring its operations to a halt.

Such a struggle will immediately come up against the entire framework of the Fair Work Australia industrial legislation and the courts that enforce it. Fair Work was put in place by the last federal Labor government, with the full support of the unions. Since then, the unions, together with Labor and Liberal governments, the corporations and the media, have invoked these laws to intimidate workers with the threat of massive fines and even criminal proceedings for any collective action.

Fair Work is part of a broader structure of suppression, including enterprise bargaining, which was also brought in by Labor and the unions. Workers are divided up, workplace by workplace. Management and the unions stitch-up a sell-out deal, and tell workers that they must accept it. If they take any action, they will be sent to court. This framework, which has been used to attack jobs, wages and conditions for three decades, has to be rejected. If it is not, workers face a future of pauperism and workplace conditions akin to a dictatorship.

This fight, however, cannot be carried out at one facility, or even one company. It requires a political movement of the working class as a whole. Workers at Smeaton Grange should appeal to staff at Coles, Woolworths, Australia Post and in other industries, to form their own rank-and-file committees and build such a movement.

The SEP calls on all sections of the working class to take up this fight and come to the aid of their class brothers and sisters at Smeaton Grange. In every industry, workers face the same cost-cutting offensive and the same political issues, including the need for a break with the trade unions and new independent organisations of struggle.

An interconnected network of rank-and-file committees could coordinate unified action, defeat attempts to isolate workers, campaign against legal attacks, and raise the strike funds that the unions, sitting on millions of dollars in assets and hundreds of millions in dues revenue, have refused to provide.

Such a movement confronts major political issues. The struggle is not just against one company management, but the entire profit system. In Australia and internationally, workers are being made to pay for the crisis of capitalism through the destruction of jobs, wages and conditions, as well as the gutting of healthcare, education and other social necessities. This is the program of all of the official political parties, including Labor

and the Greens.

For the past year, workers have borne the brunt of the criminally-negligent official response to the pandemic. Millions have been infected by the coronavirus, as governments have refused to institute lockdowns and other health measures, because of the impact on corporate profit. Warehouse workers, in an industry deemed as essential, have been on the frontlines.

At the same time, the working class has faced sweeping pro-business restructuring everywhere, enforced by the unions. In New York, 1,400 produce workers at the Hunts Point Market launched a strike last week to demand improved pay and conditions at the world's largest produce market. Like workers at Smeaton Grange, they were isolated and then sold-out by the Teamsters union. In other words, workers face the same issues around the world, demonstrating that they must unite internationally and reject all forms of nationalism and protectionism, aimed at dividing them.

The need for a fight against capitalism is posed by the Smeaton Grange dispute itself, and developments across the industry. Workers are being told that the loss of their jobs cannot be helped, because of automation.

But automation does not inevitably lead to sackings and worsened conditions. Under capitalism, it is used to slash labour costs and drive up profits. But automation—an expression of the development of society's productive capacity—should be used to lighten the load of workers, allowing them to work fewer hours without a reduction in pay, and to improve health and safety conditions.

The resources for such a development exist. They have been created by the labour of the working class. But society's wealth is monopolised by a tiny capitalist oligarchy, defended by the entire political and media establishment, including the unions.

The only alternative is the fight for a workers' government and for socialism. The banks and the corporations, including the huge retail chains Coles and Woolworths, must be placed under public ownership and democratic workers' control. The wealth of the billionaires should be expropriated. The social needs of the majority, including a permanent, full-time job with decent pay and conditions, must be the governing principle of society, not the profits of a tiny minority.

This perspective is fought for only by the Socialist Equality Party. The SEP will offer all political assistance to workers at Smeaton Grange and throughout the sector who want to take up this struggle. Contact us today.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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