

# Brisbane Coles workers, along with other Coles workers, express bitterness at union agreement with warehouse closure

**Our reporters**  
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Workers at the Coles supermarket distribution centre at Heathwood, in southern Brisbane, are opposed to the looming closure of their warehouse, just like their fellow Coles warehouse workers at Sydney's Smeaton Grange facility in NSW.

They are angry that the United Workers Union (UWU), which covers warehouse workers nationally, has told them nothing about the two-month lock-out of workers at Smeaton Grange and has accepted the Heathwood closure as well.

Speaking to a WSWS reporting team yesterday, workers also voiced outrage at the speed-up, harassment and victimisation of their counterparts at the Heathwood warehouse, as Coles management seeks to suppress all opposition to its restructuring plans.

The workers' comments underscore the fact that the Smeaton Grange closure is part of a wider program by Coles nationally to replace its existing warehouses with larger and more automated facilities, destroying thousands of jobs in the process.

Just like the Coles warehouse workers in Melbourne, who face similar closures, the UWU is trying to block information from reaching the Brisbane workers about the struggle at Smeaton Grange, in order to isolate the locked-out workers.

With the agreement of the UWU, Coles plans to shut the Heathwood warehouse by next year, in order to open a vast new plant it is currently building at Redbank, in Brisbane's west, near the city's major Australia Post mail and parcel delivery facility.

The UWU plans to enforce the Heathwood closure, ending the jobs of hundreds of workers. This highlights how much is at stake in defeating the union's attempt to help the company ram through a ballot this week to

sell out the struggle of the Smeaton Grange workers.

An estimated 1,000 workers are employed at the Heathwood facility and a related nearby warehouse, and all could lose their jobs.

A unified fight by all Coles and other warehouse workers is urgently needed to halt the company's offensive, but the UWU is intent on preventing precisely that. So clearly, workers will be required to organise the fight themselves, by setting up a network of rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the UWU and the entire trade union apparatus

The WSWS team distributed copies of the Socialist Equality Party's January 27 statement calling for a "no" vote in this week's ballot, in order to reject the UWU's betrayal at Smeaton Grange, as the first step toward launching an independent struggle in defence of all jobs and against the closures.

Only one Brisbane worker, to whom the WSWS reporters spoke, had been told anything about the Smeaton Grange lock-out. That worker said he only knew about the struggle at Smeaton Grange because of a brief notice on a bulletin board.

Each of the workers who spoke to the WSWS reporters wished to remain anonymous, for fear of company retaliation. They were concerned that Coles workers across the country were equally being kept in the dark about what was happening to them in Brisbane.

One worker described the union as "useless" because it had been told at least a year ago that Coles intended to shut the Heathwood warehouse and had decided to "let that go through." He also said the management was continually threatening to "chip" [discipline] workers for minor alleged defects, such as the condition of their

boots.

The WSWs asked another worker, who spoke from his car as he left, after finishing his shift, if workers were being intimidated at Heathwood. “Yep you’re not wrong,” he replied.

Asked to comment further, he said: “Well, where to start? We are getting pressed about percentages, and this thing called ‘trending down.’ I’ve been harassed. I was doing two hours of work on a forklift, and I was on ‘83 percent’ and they were telling me, ‘Aw no, you have to be higher’ when I don’t even get a chance to be on the forklift for very long because I go into multiple different areas.”

“We have been getting harassed for times. If we are one minute past coming off our break, or if we stop and have a little chat in the aisles, we’ve been told: ‘No get back to work, chatting is for your smokos.’”

“It’s like they don’t believe you if you have to have a day off, because you’re sick or you have to look after someone at home. You have to bring them proof. It never used to be like this. A lot of us used to enjoy working for Coles.”

These oppressive conditions had been imposed in the past three years, “pretty much since we got told we’re gonna be getting the sack, basically.” However, “we haven’t been told anything other than the place is going to be closing in 2022, or something like that. That’s all we were told.

“From my understanding, we have got a job until the EBA [a Coles-UWU enterprise bargaining agreement] finishes in 2022. That’s my understanding of it.” He said workers had not been given a closure date. “I think a lot of people would like to know when we close, because a lot of us don’t,” he said.

WSWS reporters explained that the Socialist Equality Party is urging workers to build independent rank-and-file committees to fight the closures and the wider offensive launched by the capitalist class, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The worker asked how this initiative was going, seeking more information and clarification.

The worker said he was a union member, and that the union was helping the harassment of workers. But it had told them nothing about the Smeaton Grange lock-out. “We don’t know anything, I don’t know anything about it,” he said. “I haven’t been in any union discussion for a while.” The unions used to hold

discussions, “but not recently.”

Speaking of the impact of automation, he said: “Look at it in 10 to 20 years and everything’s going to be automated, and I think the new skills you have to learn at school are with computers.”

Another worker, who had been employed at Heathwood for five years, said that with the closure coming, he could not find an alternative job. He described the situation as “hard” because, “I am not sure what I am going to do after this job.”

Another worker said he had been at Coles for 23 years. He said the Heathwood workers were facing an even worse outcome than those at Smeaton Grange. At Heathwood, the workers would get only a 38-week redundancy payout, while he thought the Smeaton Grange workers were getting 80 weeks.



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