

Australia Post rank-and-file committee calls on Coles workers to reject union sell-out

Our reporter
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A meeting of Australia Post (AP) workers yesterday passed a resolution supporting the stand of Coles workers at the Smeaton Grange plant in western Sydney, calling on them to reject a sell-out union agreement and to launch a unified struggle across the logistics and warehousing industry in defence of jobs and conditions.

The resolution is a blow to the attempts by the United Workers Union (UWU), and all of its counterparts, including in the postal service, to isolate the Smeaton Grange workers and impose a defeat upon them.

For more than ten weeks, the UWU has hung the workers out to dry during a company lockout. It has refused to organise action at any other Coles facility and has kept staff in the dark about the plight of their colleagues at Smeaton Grange. The union has sought to starve workers out, denying them any form of strike pay.

Now, it is attempting to ram through a sell-out deal and a return to work on management terms. The agreement provides for the closure of Smeaton Grange and the destruction of most, if not all, of the 350 jobs at the facility. The union has endorsed the company's offer of a 3.5 percent pay rise, barely in line with the rate of inflation, and has adopted Coles' redundancy cap, which will deny some workers recompense for years, and even decades, of employment.

In the face of substantial opposition, the union is insisting that workers have no choice but to endorse their sell-out deal in a formal ballot to be held tomorrow. If successful, this would establish a blueprint that will be followed at Coles warehouses in Melbourne, Brisbane and elsewhere, which are also slated for closure and replacement by new automated facilities.

The Australia Post workers denounced this operation as the spearhead of a broader attack on the working class, pointed to the common issues they and the Coles workers face, and called for a rebellion against the UWU, and the establishment of new organisations of struggle, in

opposition to the unions.

At their meeting, the AP rank-and-file committee passed a motion declaring its "full support for our brothers and sisters locked out at Coles Smeaton Grange. We call on workers there to vote NO and oppose the sell-out deal the UWU leadership and Coles is attempting to force you to accept.

"We urge our fellow workers to also establish an independent rank-and-file committee separate from the union and management. Seek to broaden your fight by winning support from fellow workers throughout the country and among other sections of workers.

"The postal workers rank-and-file committee will fight with you and do everything in our power to help you broaden your support and defeat the attempt of the union to sabotage your fight against the company."

In comments to the *World Socialist Web Site*, the AP workers explained why they were reaching out to the Smeaton Grange staff. None of them had been told anything about the Smeaton Grange dispute by the postal unions, with all of them expressing their appreciation to the WSWS for informing them of the lock-out.

"The attack on the workers at Smeaton Grange is an assault on the whole working class," one of the AP workers said. "If they succeed in defeating you then it weakens all of us and will open the door for even worse attacks on workers' conditions and rights. The driving force behind this is the deepening crisis of the whole capitalist system. The unions defend capitalism and must therefore impose the interests of the bosses and governments against workers' interests.

"It's clear with the upcoming vote that our brothers and sisters at Smeaton Grange have come to an impasse. The leadership of the UWU is telling them to accept a rotten deal they have rejected on 6 previous occasions. The isolation imposed by the union is an attempt to force workers to accept this agreement.

“We say to you brothers and sisters VOTE NO!!!! Join us and let us take this fight forward united against the employers and the union that is collaborating with Coles. Follow our example and form a rank-and-file committee independent of the union and management. Take the organisation of the struggle out of the hands of the union and unite with all workers in the industry to defeat this attack on our livelihoods.

“We pledge our support to you in this critical struggle and will do everything in our power to unite postal workers with our brothers and sisters at Smeaton Grange.”

The workers noted that they faced similar issues at AP. Over the past year, the Communication Electrical and Plumbers Union (CEPU) and the Communications Workers Union (CWU) have imposed a restructuring at Australia Post, aimed at preparing the government-owned service for privatisation. The Alternative Delivery Model (ADM), introduced with the backing of the union, has involved a turn away from letter delivery towards the lucrative parcel sector.

“The CEPU at Australia Post has acted in much the same way as the UWW at Coles,” one of the AP workers said. “The CEPU promised a proper fight and repulsion of the newly introduced ADM, however within weeks of that promise, the CEPU had made a deal with the management forbidding us to take industrial action and requiring us to undertake duties that are unreasonable and unsafe.”

Another of the workers elaborated: “The refusal of the United Workers Union to provide their own members with strike pay or financial assistance assists management who always try and starve striking workers back to work. It directly plays into the hands of Coles and isolates the workers from the rest of the working class.

“I say this because the automation of warehousing and distribution is something we at Australia Post have faced with the Alternative Delivery Model over the past six months. The unions that cover our workforce also present it as inevitable that we must accept that automation will not make our lives and burden easier, but rather that it means a reduction of jobs.

“At every stage Australia Post unions tell us why we can’t fight, why we have to leave it to parliament and politicians and why any struggle is illegal in one way or another. It’s not illegal to sack workers but it’s illegal for workers to defend their jobs. I think the Smeaton Grange Coles workers are courageous to have constantly rejected the sell-out agreements brought to them by the union and to have fought for so long isolated from financial and

class support.

“Like Australia Post workers, those at Smeaton Grange need to create a rank-and-file committee independent of the unions that would unite Coles shop assistants and warehousing workers with the broader working class. The desire to rebel against the present state of affairs is clear by the actions of those locked out. There is now a need for this rebellion to take on a new program and a new organisation to express the independent interests of workers.”

A fourth worker stated: “Technological developments, not only in warehousing but the whole of society, should be used to reduce working hours with no loss of pay. A similar thing is happening at Australia Post. A change of snail mail going to emails has seen the increase of parcels. Australia Post has used the pandemic, with the collaboration of the union, to carry out restructuring. They have cut the workforce, but the workload has increased, and employees are forced to work longer because of the staff shortage. They should be employing more people. Instead, they want to increase the rate of exploitation of their employees.

“I think, as in Australia Post, Smeaton Grange Coles workers should establish a rank-and-file committee to take the struggle out of the hands of the unions. Rank-and-file committees should be created in every industry and workplace. The working class should learn from its history. It is only by mobilizing the whole strength of the working class that we have had victories. The breaking down of the working class industry by industry and workplace by workplace has led to decades of defeats.”

The worker insisted that “this is a struggle against capitalism and the dominance of society by big business. We need to fight for workers’ governments to implement socialist policies, including putting the banks and the corporations under public ownership and democratic workers’ control. That’s the only way we can secure our rights. This is an international fight.”



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