

Australia: Coles workers speak out against company-union job-cutting drive

Our reporters
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There is widespread opposition among Coles workers throughout the country to the United Workers Union's attempts to ram through a sell-out deal at the company's Smeaton Grange warehouse in southwestern Sydney.

In a significant stand for all Coles staff and the working class as a whole, Smeaton Grange employees voted down an enterprise agreement that had been pushed by the union, in an online ballot on Tuesday. The vote signals the determination of workers to fight the closure of their facility, and the scheduled destruction of most, if not all, of the 350 jobs there.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is holding an online meeting Saturday, 5 p.m. (AEDT), entitled "After Smeaton Grange workers reject union sell-out: The way forward for Coles and Woolworths workers." (Click [here](#) to register and participate.)

The SEP has stressed the need for a break with the UWU, and the establishment of independent rank-and-file committees at warehouses operated by Coles and its chief competitor Woolworths throughout the country. The critical importance of this step is underscored by the fact that the attempt to close Smeaton Grange is just the first in a series of planned shutterings.

Over the next four years, Coles and Woolworths are intending to close at least eight warehouses, at the cost of at least 3,500 jobs. The SEP is calling for a unified industrial and political struggle by all employees in the sector, to defeat the mass job-cull.

The UWU has suppressed information about the more than two-month lockout of the Smeaton Grange workers, and its attempts to ram through a sell-out, from other Coles employees across the country, including at warehouses in Brisbane and Melbourne.

A Coles warehouse worker in Melbourne told the

WSWS: "What is happening at Smeaton Grange is unfair and unjust. The workers there are being played with, all because of money.

"People have recently started discussing it at our work because they have read the article from the *World Socialist Web Site*. The union and management were keeping it quiet.

"What is happening there is terrible. It is so void of humanity. They try to make these workers disposable. The workers rejected the agreement, now the union is trying to force them to accept what they've already voted to reject.

"The law is preventing the workers from standing up for their own rights. Forming a rank-and-file committee will take a lot of work, but I think it is definitely doable, if everyone has the same vision and compassion for other workers and for themselves. On the global scale, the working class should be able to take back the power from the people who have it.

"It is quite interesting and a lot of people at work have started to discuss this. A lot of people are keen to leave the union altogether. All they do is take \$12 out of our pay cheques each week.

"Last August, there was an outbreak of COVID in our warehouse, and 30 people got the virus. Every one of those and their close contacts were placed in isolation. Those left behind had to do 12-hour shifts for six days a week. All you could do was go to sleep to get ready for the next day.

"There was not much communication as to who was at risk or anything. It was quite stressful. The union was nowhere to be seen.

"It went on for about a month. For the first two weeks we were expected to push out as many orders as we could, to make up for the missing people. Then they mass hired from another agency to make up for the

ones in isolation. It was like a game of luck, how can you put a number on somebody's life?

“The union doesn't come and talk to us at all. The only contact was on my induction day. Somebody did a speech and we were given some papers, to have the deduction taken from our wages. The only thing they said was if you were to lose employment, they would be able to help you find other employment.

“I think you are supposed to be able to apply for permanent part time or full time after 18 months as a casual. They decide by your work rate, and your attendance, whether you are 'worthy' to become full time. But there are people who have worked there for five years who are still casual.

“The unions and the government have been shaking hands and being best buddies.”

Another worker at a Melbourne warehouse said he thought that what was happening at Smeaton Grange “might come to Melbourne. I've been working for over a year as a casual and when it gets busy it is very challenging. If someone gets injured, they can't get Workcover compensation because it is so complicated if you're not permanent. When it is quiet you don't get many hours and shifts are cancelled.

“I've not seen any tangible evidence of the union defending Coles workers in Sydney, casual workers, or workers in general. Last time I spoke to the Socialist Equality Party you said that you were planning to have a new organisation. As I said the UWU are not doing what they should do for workers. The \$400 that they gave to the Smeaton Grange workers, who have been locked out for ten weeks, is nothing.”

Two Coles warehouses in Brisbane are also slated for closure, threatening more than a thousand jobs. A worker at one of them told the WSWS: “We were sat down at a meeting to discuss our enterprise agreement, organised with the unions, which included redundancy terms. Everyone signed off on the agreement. Two weeks later the Coles management informed all the workers here that the factory will be closing

“The union delegates have been leaving since the announcements were made. They understand that workers are getting done over and don't want to be a part of it.”

We encourage all Coles, Woolworths and other workers to attend the SEP public meeting at 5p.m. (AEDT) tomorrow. Click

here to register and participate.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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