Australian unions suppress news of Coles workers' vote to reject UWU sell-out

Mike Head
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It is now four days since the 350 locked-out workers at the Coles supermarket warehouse at Smeaton Grange in southwestern Sydney voted courageously to reject a sell-out agreement proposed by the United Workers Union. In response, the UWU is still trying to suppress all news of their decisive stand against the destruction of jobs and conditions across their industry.

The UWU is seeking to prevent other workers from even knowing about the official ballot, which saw the workers vote down the union's latest deal with Coles by 167 to 163. The UWU has still not made any post on its official Facebook page or its website announcing the result.

Instead, the union only acknowledged that the offer had been voted down, in a Facebook comment buried deep beneath a posting from January 22.

That January 22 post falsely reported: "United Workers Union members at Coles Smeaton Grange have just voted to accept an offer by Coles and will go back to work." This misleading claim was based on a dubious UWU-organised ballot, which had to be ratified by an official ballot of all workers.

In other words, before the final vote was even taken, the UWU had broadcast that the fight against the near three-month lockout by Coles was over.

This response is the clearest warning of the ongoing efforts of the UWU and other unions to isolate and bury the Smeaton Grange workers' struggle and permit Coles to shut the warehouse and axe all or most of the 350 jobs. It also demonstrates the need for the Smeaton Grange workers, and all warehouse workers, to make a complete break with the UWU and all the union apparatuses, which have proven to be nothing but a police force of management.

New organisations of struggle, totally independent of the unions, are required. The Smeaton Grange closure is part of a wholesale restructuring by Coles and its main rival, Woolworths. The two companies have announced the closure of at least eight warehouses—at the cost of at least 3,500 jobs—with the agreement of the unions, in order to open more fully automated Amazon-style facilities.

Workers need to establish genuine rank-and-file committees at Smeaton Grange, and at all Coles and Woolworths warehouses, to organise a unified industrial and political struggle against the job-cutting program of the companies and the unions.

To discuss how to defeat the UWU's ongoing sell-out efforts, mobilise support for the Smeaton Grange workers and advance the fight they have taken up, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) is holding an online meeting today, February 6, at 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 blackout on the critical vote by the Coles workers has been joined by the corporate media, which has not published a single report, as well as by all the trade unions and the Labor Party, which have remained equally silent. Except for the *World Socialist Web Site* and SEP supporters, who have circulated the news at other Coles warehouses in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane that also face closure, no other workers would know about the stand taken by the workers at Smeaton Grange.

Not only is the UWU blocking news of the vote. It has continued to refuse to organise solidarity action or establish a strike fund to sustain the Smeaton Grange workers, who have gone almost three months without pay, and to prepare for the struggles looming against every other warehouse closure.

As part of the drive to starve the Smeaton Grange workers back to work, essentially on the company's terms, the UWU—a wealthy union that boasts of more than 150,000 members—has organised only an online call for

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donations to the UWU, to distribute some money and food vouchers to the locked-out workers. That fund currently stands at just over $74,000—an average of just $251 per locked-out worker. No one can survive on that level of income.

The union took in membership fees of $49.9 million in 2019–20. It also received other income of $201 million from investments and assets acquired by union amalgamation, and holds assets totalling $300.8 million, including cash reserves of $94.2 million. These figures come from the UWU's own annual report to the federal government's Registered Organisations Commission.

Faced by mounting hostility among its members to the lack of a strike fund, on February 4, the UWU called national online meetings of its supermarket delegates to "discuss the idea of a strike levy." The announcement by UWU organiser Alycia Economidis emphasised that no immediate action would be taken. The meeting was "just the beginning of a conversation."

This was two days after the Smeaton Grange workers rejected the UWU's proposed agreement.

According to delegates, the union leadership reiterated at the meetings its opposition to a strike fund, claiming that it did not have the resources and could not possibly ask its members for a levy.

When the UWU was formed, in November 2019, by an amalgamation between United Voice and the National Union of Workers (NUW), the *Australian Financial Review* described it as "the biggest blue-collar union in the country" with members in "key strategic points of the economy."

The financial newspaper quoted a NUW official, Godfrey Moase, who wrote on *The Social Review* website that this was "more than a traditional merger between two unions." It was "a radical and transformative proposal that reimagines union structures to be fit for purpose in the precarious world of late capitalism."

The reality is demonstrated by the union's reaction to the Smeaton Grange lockout, which follows the UWU's sell-out of the one last year at Woolworths' warehouse at Wyong, north of Sydney. Like all the other supposed "super unions" formed since the 1980s as union memberships imploded, the UWU is an apparatus intent on strangling workers' struggles.

In its false January 22 Facebook report that the Smeaton Grange workers had voted to "go back to work," the UWU said it had gained a promise by Coles to offer "a minimum number of 50 Voluntary Redundancies, which can go up to 80, with a process that starts from today's date." This is another attempt to end the struggle by holding out the prospect of early payouts.

Throughout the dispute, the UWU has presented the closure and job destruction as "inevitable." It claimed only to be seeking a "just transition" and improved redundancy payments. Via its deal with Coles, the union dispensed with even that posturing, accepting the company's refusal to lift payments above 80 weeks, regardless of length of service.

By rejecting the Coles-UWU deal, the Smeaton Grange workers have taken a significant stand, not only in defence of their own jobs and conditions, but also those of all the warehouse workers, who face union-enforced sackings and closures, and the working class as a whole.

In an SEP statement published last week, "Reject union sell-out at Coles Smeaton Grange warehouse in Sydney! Form rank-and-file committees to defend jobs and stop the closure!" we explained that Smeaton Grange workers face a turning point. Now that workers have voted "no," the struggle at Smeaton Grange must become the starting point for a broader offensive by the working class as a whole. As we said:

"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."

Read the full statement here.

A political perspective to take forward this fight will be discussed at the public meeting today at 5 p.m. AEDT. We urge you to attend and to contribute on these critical questions. Register in advance here.

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