

SEP meeting in Australia discusses political issues facing locked-out Coles workers and the need for independent rank-and-file organisations

Our reporter
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Last Saturday, the Socialist Equality Party held a well-attended public meeting to discuss how to take forward the struggle of the Coles Smeaton Grange warehouse workers in southwest Sydney and to consider the political issues confronting the working class. Over 80 people from all Australian states, including workers, students and youth, participated.

The full video of the meeting can be viewed below.

The meeting was held five days after the Smeaton Grange workers, who have been locked out for almost three months, voted down yet another attempt by the supermarket corporation and the United Workers Union (UWU) to impose a sellout enterprise bargaining agreement.

The back-room deal concocted by management and the union is designed to ensure the closure of the facility and the axing of up to 350 jobs. The workers, who have been isolated by the union and not provided any strike pay, have rejected virtually identical proposals six times.

The SEP meeting supported the courageous stand taken by the Smeaton Grange workers and discussed how to defeat the escalating assault on jobs and hard-won conditions—issues facing not just workers in warehouses but across all industries and internationally.

SEP National Secretary Cheryl Crisp chaired the event, which was addressed by Jim Franklin, a member of the recently-established Australia Post workers rank-and-file committee, and Oscar Grenfell, a SEP National Committee member and *World Socialist Web Site* journalist.

Crisp explained the political and economic context of

the attack on the Smeaton Grange workers and its relationship to the attempts by governments and big business everywhere to impose the economic cost of the COVID-19 disaster on the working class.

Crisp warned that the mass sackings already imposed by major corporations, such as Virgin, Telstra and Qantas, were about to be stepped up. The end of federal government JobKeeper wage subsidies, rent moratoriums and limited social assistance would devastate the lives of tens of thousands of workers and their families.

Unless the attack on Coles workers was defeated, “it will become a blueprint for the implementation of mass job cuts and increased casualisation of the workforce, leaving young people with little or no prospects for secure and permanent work.”

Franklin read the resolution passed at the previous week’s inaugural meeting of the Australia Post rank-and-file committee calling for full working class support for the Smeaton Grange workers and a unified struggle across the logistics and warehousing industry in defence of jobs and conditions. The UWU’s isolation of the Smeaton Grange workers and its collaboration with management, he said, was similar to that of the unions at Australia Post.

“Employers everywhere use the pandemic to undertake far-reaching restructuring,” Franklin said, and explained management’s Alternative Delivery Model (ADM) to restructure Australia Post, via casualisation, job destruction and higher productivity. The unions, in close collaboration with the government and Australia Post management, had given a “green

light” to all this, he said.

Postal workers, Franklin said, were starting to recognise that they cannot defend their conditions within the framework of the unions. This is why they were seeking new organisations of struggle, independent of the unions, management and the government.

Franklin concluded by calling on workers at Smeaton Grange to “draw the same conclusions, build independent rank-and-file committees and join with us in this struggle. We will do everything we can to support and help you form such organisations.”

Grenfell gave an overview of the Smeaton Grange dispute. He described how the company prepared for the lockout and detailed the role of the UWU in isolating the locked-out workers and attempting to impose an agreement to facilitate an “orderly closure” of the plant. The union’s treachery and its refusal to provide strike pay, was a “calculated exercise in blackmail.”

Grenfell outlined Coles’ warehouse closure program, which would eliminate five distribution centres and destroy at least 2,200 jobs. Woolworths, Australia’s other major supermarket chain, also planned to close four warehouses and axe 1,300 jobs. Grenfell compared this to total closure of the car industry in Australia, negotiated and imposed by the unions, and its disastrous impact on working-class communities.

“This experience, replicated in one industry after another, has important lessons for Coles and Woolworths workers,” he said. “A genuine struggle means a fight to defend all the jobs. This cannot be carried out at one warehouse. It requires a unified movement across the sector. But that in turn depends on the establishment of rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions.”

Grenfell explained the democratic nature and political tasks of rank-and-file committees and the necessity for a socialist and internationalist perspective to advance this fight.

The reports provoked a series of questions, almost all relating to rank-and-file committees—how they could be built; what should they do; what would be their legal status; and whether these committees should operate within the existing unions?

In their responses, Grenfell, Franklin and Crisp emphasised that the unions could not be reformed or

transformed into genuine organisations of working-class struggle. What was required, all the speakers stressed, was that these rank-and-file organisations, democratically-controlled by the workers and representing their interests, should be linked to the fight for workers’ governments and for socialism.

We urge all WSWS readers to watch the entire meeting video, share it on social media, call workplace meetings to discuss these issues, and send us statements of support to the Smeaton Grange workers. The fact that questions on the character and tasks of rank-and-file committees dominated the discussion session is significant. It is an indication that serious workers and young people recognise that the political challenges ahead apply not just to the Smeaton Grange dispute but to workers across Australia and internationally.



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