

Australian union trying to force through sell-out at Coles Smeaton Grange after workers vote no

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The United Workers Union (UWU) has stepped-up its attempts to force locked-out workers at Coles Smeaton Grange warehouse in southwestern Sydney to accept a sell-out enterprise agreement that they voted down in an official ballot only last week.

The pseudo-left Solidarity group published an article yesterday detailing some of the union's latest anti-democratic manoeuvres. These included a dubious UWU "survey" of workers over the weekend, on the offer they had just rejected, and a meeting last Monday at which a senior UWU official restated the union's refusal to provide strike pay and insisted that workers had no choice but to accept a sell-out.

Solidarity functions as a "loyal opposition" to the UWU leadership. It bemoans the attempts of the UWU to impose a defeat on workers as a "tragedy," as though the union's collaboration with Coles and its attacks on workers is the result of a misunderstanding. At the same time, Solidarity insists that workers cannot break from the UWU or take any independent action to defend their jobs and prevent the scheduled closure of Smeaton Grange.

Because it functions as a last line of defence for the UWU, Solidarity is welcomed to meetings called by the union bureaucrats and a handful of delegates at Smeaton Grange who do their bidding. By contrast, the officials and their lackeys have been intensely hostile to WSWs reporters, demanding that they leave the Smeaton Grange picket and blocking them from speaking with workers.

On February 2, the Smeaton Grange workers voted down a company offer that had been aggressively promoted by the union. The deal provided for the shutdown of the warehouse, the destruction of most, if

not all, of the 350 jobs, a wage rise of just 3.5 percent per annum in the meantime, and inadequate redundancy provisions put forward by Coles early in the dispute. This was the sixth occasion in which workers had rejected a version of this "offer," demonstrating their determination to fight the UWU sell-out.

Coles and the union immediately responded by seeking, yet again, to bludgeon the workers into accepting the agreement.

According to the Solidarity article, Coles came back with the same offer, plus a \$1,000 sign-on bonus. This was a transparent attempt to take advantage of the financial hardship facing workers, who have not been given a wage by the company for three months, or strike pay from the UWU.

Solidarity stated that the union called a meeting of delegates last Friday, which rejected the proposal "as an insult."

The UWU, again acting as an enforcer of Coles' demands, then sent a survey to all workers, asking whether they agreed with or opposed the company offer. The survey was only the latest attempt by the union to nullify a "no" vote of workers, through a dubious in-house ballot that has no legal standing.

On January 21, for instance, the UWU held an "indicative" vote of union members on the offer, a week after it had been rejected in a ballot organised by the company. The UWU then announced that a narrow majority had voted to accept a deal in the January 21 vote that it called. It stated, however, that over 100 ballots had been discounted as "duplicates." This, combined with the fact that workers have voted down the agreement on every other occasion, cast grave doubts on the bona fides of the UWU ballot.

In last weekend's survey, the union was not able to manufacture a "yes" vote, with 53.4 percent of workers who responded rejecting Coles' proposal.

The union then called a meeting at Smeaton Grange on Monday, from which WSWS reporters were excluded by officials. According to Solidarity, Matt Toner, the UWU's director of logistics, had flown from Melbourne to address the gathering.

Toner reportedly dwelt at length on the survey result, presenting it as an indication of "divisions" among the Smeaton Grange workers. The union, he said, had to represent all workers, including those who wanted to accept the agreement, meaning that the UWU could not do anything more than it was.

The UWU official flatly rejected calls for strike pay to be provided. "The only financial assistance we can give you is what we've given you," Solidarity cites Toner as declaring.

In reality, the union's own financial statements, submitted to the government's Registered Organisations Commission, show that it has substantial funds and assets. For the 2019-20 financial year, the UWU reported that it received \$49.9 million in membership dues from workers, along with "sustentation fees" of \$1.5 million from state and territory branches to the national office. Its declared assets stood at \$300.8 million, including \$94.2 million in cash reserves.

Despite this, workers have been provided only with a handful of \$200 supermarket vouchers over the course of some 12 weeks.

Toner's comments demonstrate, again, that in addition to protecting the funds and privileges of the union officialdom, the refusal to provide strike pay is a deliberate strategy to starve workers out. Toner cynically invoked the "yes" votes in last weekend's survey to justify the union's attempts to strike a sell-out with Coles. But many workers have said they only vote "yes" in ballots, because they have exhausted their personal savings and superannuation during the lockout.

The latest sordid manoeuvres of the union demonstrate the political bankruptcy of the perspective of Solidarity and all the pseudo-lefts who insist that the working class must remain shackled to the trade unions. Speaking for affluent layers of the middle-class, increasingly integrated into the union apparatus and

allied with the big business Labor Party, its role is to prevent any independent struggle by workers.

That is why Solidarity supports the entire framework of the dispute as presented by the UWU leadership. The pseudo-left group, and the union officials, both declare that the Smeaton Grange closure is inevitable, as well as the destruction of jobs. Together, they insist that the only issue at stake is a "just transition," through "fair redundancies." In practice, this mealy-mouthed rhetoric means a union sell-out that provides the company with everything that it wants and throws workers onto the scrap-heap of unemployment and low-paid, casual work.

The only way forward for workers is a complete break with the UWU. With the three-month company lock-out set to end on February 11, the union is doing everything possible to enforce a return to work on management terms. This would set in train redundancies, sackings, and an "orderly closure" of Smeaton Grange that would serve as a blueprint for at least eight other warehouse shutterings planned by Coles and its chief rival Woolworths over the next four years.

The Socialist Equality Party has called for the establishment of independent rank-and-file committees at Smeaton Grange and every other Coles and Woolworths facility, to coordinate a unified political and industrial fight in defence of every job and against all the closures.

This would inevitably involve a political struggle against, not only company managements, but the government, Labor, the unions and the Fair Work industrial laws that all of them use to intimidate workers with the threat of massive fines or criminal prosecution for any action. Such a fight can only go forward through the development of a broader political movement of the working class, based on a socialist program directed against the austerity agenda being imposed on workers across the board.



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