

Australia: Coles extends Smeaton Grange lockout, denounces workers and “extremist anti-union socialists”

Oscar Grenfell
11 February 2021

Supermarket giant Coles announced yesterday that it is “indefinitely” extending the three-month lockout of workers at its Smeaton Grange warehouse in southwestern Sydney. This is an attempt to starve workers into accepting a sell-out deal, pushed by the United Workers Union (UWU), that would result in the closure of the facility and the destruction of most, if not all, of the 350 jobs there.

In an extraordinary video posted online last night on behalf of the company, Matt Swindells, Coles’ chief operations officer, revealed the real battle lines at Smeaton Grange, throughout the warehousing industry and more broadly.

Swindells praised the UWU for seeking to impose Coles’ demands, castigated workers for their repeated rejection of the sell-out and denounced “extremist anti-union socialists,” i.e., the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*, for disrupting the company-UWU operation. The video is cast-iron proof that at Smeaton Grange, as in every other industrial dispute, the company and the union are on one side, and the workers on the other.

Swindells began by referring to a union ballot on January 21. A week after workers had rejected the sell-out deal in a company vote, the UWU called its own “indicative” poll, in an attempt to manufacture a pretext for a return to work on management terms, and to nullify previous “no” votes.

The union claimed that a narrow majority of workers ratified the agreement in its January 21 vote. The in-house ballot, which had no legal standing, was extremely dubious. It was the only time in seven votes throughout the dispute that a “yes” majority was registered, and by the UWU’s own admission, more than 100 ballots were discounted as “duplicates.”

Despite this, Coles and the union both declared that the sell-out was a done deal as a result of the dodgy UWU ballot.

Swindells declared that after the January 21 vote: “We were confident that this dispute was behind us. In fact, the union declared as such on Facebook, and had started to work

with us on the return to work plan.” He added: “I think we thought it was all done, on both sides, the union and Coles.” This would have allowed for a resumption of operations at Smeaton Grange, and for the company to “progress with voluntary redundancies,” i.e., job destruction and the closure of the warehouse.

But then, on February 2, workers rejected the agreement in an official vote, which, unlike the highly questionable union ballot, had legal standing. Swindells made clear that Coles and the union viewed this courageous stand by workers against the sell-out as a calamity.

The senior Coles manager condemned workers who had encouraged their colleagues to “vote no” as “deeply unhelpful and enormously irresponsible.” He obscenely sought to blame them for the fact that Coles is extending the lockout and refusing to pay the workers.

Swindells absurdly couched his comments as a denunciation of a “minority” of workers who were “pushing propaganda,” despite the fact that a clear majority of workers voted “no” on February 2. Moreover, many of those who voted “yes” did so because they have been pauperised by the company’s withholding of wages and the UWU’s refusal to provide strike pay for 12 weeks.

The rejection of the deal, Swindells said, means “there is no plan.” The company, he indicated, would not end the lockout until the workers submitted to all of the Coles-UWU demands.

Swindells declared: “The only people who have an alternative plan are the extreme socialists who have infiltrated this dispute. They’ve got their voices in the ears of people, and they’re suggesting this wider agenda of taking on big business and the banks. They’re pushing the agenda now.” He warned that the “extreme socialists” were seeking to extend the dispute to other Coles warehouses and facilities.

Swindells continued his anti-socialist diatribe. Speaking with evident anger, he stated: “These are faceless people,

who are not even part of the union. In fact, they are anti-union people. Down on the picket, handing out leaflets, stoking up the agenda.”

In other words Swindells, one of the top national managers at Coles, among Australia’s largest corporations, was defending the union from socialist criticism. His comments demonstrate that management views the UWU as an essential partner in enforcing its agenda.

Swindells’ comments were clearly a reference to the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS).

Throughout the dispute, the SEP and the WSWS have correctly warned that the UWU is a police force of management. They have called for a complete break with the union, the establishment of independent rank-and-file committees and an industrial and political struggle across the operations of Coles, its chief rival Woolworths, and the warehousing and retail sector as a whole, to defend all jobs and prevent a series of looming closures in the industry.

The SEP and the WSWS were the only political organisation and publication to expose the dubious January 21 union poll, insist that the dispute was not over and to call for a “no” vote in the official ballot on February 2. This clearly resonated with the experiences of workers, who correctly see the UWU as an arm of company management.

The SEP has mobilised political support for the Smeaton Grange workers from other sections of the working class, including Australia Post workers, university academics and teachers. Its campaigners have informed Coles warehouse workers throughout Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne of the lockout, after they were kept in the dark by the union.

Swindells concluded by summing up Coles’ strategy. There would be no return without a sell-out agreement. Management would continue to “engage” with the union. And the UWU bureaucrats would have to “keep the extremists out of this.”

These are the dictates that the UWU is seeking to impose on the warehouse workers.

Over the past week, the union has ramped-up the pressure on workers to accept a return on management terms, including by holding yet another dubious “survey” on a new agreement. Top UWU officials, who run an organisation that reported \$94.2 million in cash reserves and \$300.8 million in total assets at the end of the last financial year, have restated their refusal to provide strike pay.

And the union bureaucrats and their lackeys are following Coles’ instruction that they “keep the extremists out,” by trying to block the WSWS and the SEP from speaking to workers at the Smeaton Grange picket.

Workers confront a choice.

Swindells and the UWU have made clear that they will

accept nothing less than complete capitulation to all the company demands, for closure, mass job destruction, paltry wage rises and inadequate redundancy provisions that deny workers recompense for years, as well as potential decades of employment.

Such a defeat would throw many, if not most, of the workers on the scrapheap of unemployment and low-paid precarious labour. It would further devastate the working class western and southwestern suburbs of Sydney and provide a blueprint for mass sackings across Coles, Woolworths and more broadly.

The real alternative is the socialist perspective that Swindells was warning against: a break with the union, the formation of new organisations of struggle, a unified struggle across the industry, and what he described as a “wider agenda of taking on the banks and big business.”

Smeaton Grange workers are in a fight, not only with management, but the corporate elite, the government, the Labor Party, the union and the Fair Work laws that they use to suppress any collective action. This can be defeated only through the development of a political movement of the working class as a whole, directed against the austerity agenda of the ruling elite and all of its servants, including the unions.

The necessity of a struggle for socialism is posed by the Smeaton Grange dispute itself. The only viable perspective to stop the closure, defend the jobs and ensure workers’ rights, is one that fights for the transfer of Coles, Woolworths, the big corporations and the banks, to public ownership and democratic workers’ control. That means a workers’ government and socialism.

We encourage all workers who are seeking to fight the company-union sell-out to contact the SEP today.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact