

# Australian university workers support locked-out Coles workers

**Our correspondent**  
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Academics and other university workers have sent statements of support to the locked-out workers at the Coles supermarket chain's Smeaton Grange warehouse in southwestern Sydney, backing the crucial stand they have taken in rejecting efforts by the United Workers Union (UWU) to sell out their three-month struggle.

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 to make way for new automated facilities. It allowed 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 proposal demonstrating their determination to fight the UWU sell-out. However, Coles and the union have responded by seeking, yet again, to starve and coerce the workers into accepting the agreement. Despite holding assets worth more than \$300 million, the union continues to refuse to provide strike pay to the locked-out warehouse workers, let alone organise support action by any of its 150,000 members.

A meeting of academics and other university workers, supporters of the Committee for Public Education, last week drafted and sent the following resolution of support to the Smeaton Grange workers:

“We fully support your decision to vote ‘no’ and reject the attempt by Coles and the United Workers Union to force you back to work on company terms. You have taken this stand not just for yourselves but for all the warehouse workers who are facing closures, as well as the working class as a whole. Automation, which should reduce workloads and enhance the quality of life for workers, is instead being used by the

employers to destroy workers’ jobs and conditions.

“We urge you not to place any confidence in the UWU, or anyone claiming to be able to ‘reform’ it from within. You have now seen the true nature of the union. It is a police force for Coles and the corporations. While you have taken a strong stand in defying Coles’ lock-out, the union bureaucracy has isolated you, refused you strike pay, and tried repeatedly to push through Coles’ agreement.

“We have faced similar bitter experiences on the campuses, where the National Tertiary Education Union has pushed through agreements that have helped the employers destroy up to 90,000 jobs in the past year, and also cut wages and ramp up workloads. We are fighting to build genuine rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the unions, to organise a struggle against this historic assault. We urge you to do the same and link up our struggles. We have to build a new working class leadership, based on a socialist perspective to re-organise society to meet social need, not corporate profit.”

Lucy, a senior law lecturer, told the WSWs that after reading the WSWs coverage of the Coles dispute, she was “almost incandescent with rage.” She said: “What is almost as appalling as the union’s inaction is the way in which this issue has been ignored by the media!”

The longstanding law educator sent the following statement:

“The Coles workers at the Smeaton Grange warehouse have been well and truly sold out by the United Workers Union (UWU). The workers have been betrayed by the union which they joined and to which they paid their dues. The union which, on acceptance of these dues, implicitly promised to protect their rights at work and ultimately their jobs. Given its refusal to support the workers in their struggle, it is reasonable to

ask who or what does the union actually represent. In view of its previous record in this and similar disputes, the answer can only be ‘the big corporations.’

“The UWU’s actions and, in this case, egregious inaction, is a glaring example of both breach of duty to its members and consequential breach of its obligations under the contract with each individual worker, formed when the worker first joined. Members pay their dues and in return expect and are entitled to the support and protection of the union. The launch of an online crowdfund does not even begin to fulfil its obligations. Indeed, it is further evidence of its abandonment.

“The whole tragic situation at Smeaton Grange is cogent proof of the fact that the UWU has completely abrogated its duties to its members and protects, instead, the interests of employers. There can be no doubt that, as stated on the WSWS on 8 January 2021, ‘new organisations of struggle are required,’ because the traditional ones are certainly not working!”

Gill, another experienced academic, also sent a statement of support. It said:

“The locked-out workers at Coles at Smeaton Grange deserve support from all who wish to see not only decent wages for the workers who support us through their daily labour, but all who wish to see the country provide social justice to all. Employers are using the pandemic to make devastating changes in employment practices and to grab greater profits. The UWU must provide more and better support for its own members. It is a rich union that can easily afford to do so.”

A statement of support by Karl, a senior lecturer, said:

“Over the past year, under the cover of the pandemic we have witnessed widespread corporate attacks on workers conditions and jobs in Australia and across the world. Such attacks have often been aided and abetted by unions. The Smeaton Grange case is no exception.

“As a university worker I support the locked-out workers in their struggle against Coles and their union. Their courage should be front-page news! I am sure that most Australians, if they knew the truth about the situation, would support them.”



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