

Australian pseudo-left group Solidarity running cover for union sell-out at Coles Smeaton Grange

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Supermarket giant Coles announced on Wednesday that it is indefinitely extending a three-month lockout of 350 workers at the company's Smeaton Grange warehouse in southwestern Sydney. This marks a new stage in the attempts of the company, and the United Workers Union (UWU), to force staff to accept a sell-out enterprise agreement that would result in the closure of the facility and the destruction of all, or most of the jobs there.

The company's attacks are being facilitated by an entire chain of political command. In the first instance, the lockout is being conducted under draconian Fair Work industrial legislation, brought in by a Labor government, with the full support of the unions, in 2009. Secondly, the official media, including the state-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation, is blacking out the workers' plight. Only one article has been published on the dispute in the corporate press this year.

But the linchpin of Coles' operation is the UWU. For the past 12 weeks, the union has isolated the workers; rejected calls for a broader struggle, involving action at other warehouses operated by Coles and its chief rival Woolworths; repeatedly sought to ram-through a sell-out agreement, and refused to provide any strike pay, in a bid to starve workers out.

Amid growing opposition to the sell-out and recognition amongst workers that the UWU is an arm of company management, everything for Coles, the corporate elite and the political establishment, depends on preventing workers from making a break with the union, developing their own organisations of genuine struggle and turning to a new political perspective.

The pseudo-left group Solidarity is playing a crucial role in seeking to prevent such a break and to chain workers to the UWU, as it attempts to force through a sell-out.

Solidarity has positioned itself as a "loyal opposition" to the UWU leadership, bemoaning its attacks on workers as a "tragedy," as though the actions of the right-wing union officials are the result of a misunderstanding. At the same time, Solidarity insists that workers must remain within this rotten bureaucratic apparatus, and promotes the fraud that the union can be pressured to "get behind its members at Smeaton Grange."

Throughout, Solidarity has promoted the official framework of the dispute, set by Coles and the UWU leadership. Like the multi-billion dollar corporation and the right-wing union officials, Solidarity insists that the closure of Smeaton Grange, as well as four other Coles facilities and three Woolworths warehouses, is inevitable. Workers must accept the destruction of their jobs, in the interests of corporate

profit. The only issue is to secure a supposed "just transition" and "fair redundancies," as they are thrown on the scrap-heap.

Solidarity's support for the warehouse closures was spelled out in its first article on the dispute. Published on November 26, the piece was indistinguishable from a UWU press release.

The article approvingly noted that "The outcome of bargaining at the [Smeaton Grange] centre will set a benchmark for closure arrangements at Coles' two other distribution centres in NSW also closing at Goulburn and Eastern Creek, as well as others in Queensland."

Solidarity favourably quoted Matt Toner, the UWU's warehousing director, who has played a key role in trying to impose a defeat at Smeaton Grange. His remarks, which Solidarity promoted, made clear that the union was seeking to ensure an "orderly shutdown" of Smeaton Grange. "Workers want a just transition," Toner said. "For many [workers] nearing the end of their working lives, finding another job will be difficult and finding another full-time permanent job could be impossible. Coles has a responsibility to workers that have given so much."

Workers are undoubtedly concerned about redundancy provisions. But the union's attempts to limit the dispute to the question of redundancy payouts has been a central mechanism of its bid to ensure that there is no struggle in defence of jobs and against the closures. The bogus character of the union posturing has been exposed in recent weeks, as it has adopted the inadequate redundancy proposals made by Coles early in the dispute.

For weeks, Solidarity's line was completely indistinguishable from that of the UWU leadership.

Only on January 16, after eight weeks of the union isolating the workers, did Solidarity make the mildest criticism of the UWU leadership. The union had taken a "neutral position" on a company ballot to ram through an agreement based on all of Coles demands. This was a continuation of the UWU's attempts to ensure a rapid end to the dispute, on company terms, and came as a surprise to nobody who had been following the sordid manoeuvres of the bureaucracy.

Solidarity, however, declared its "astonishment" that "the union leadership took an unheard of 'neutral' position." This was "shameful." But no conclusions were drawn, other than a plaintive appeal for the "UWU leaders" to "take action."

Solidarity's primary objection to the ballot, moreover, was that it was "non-union." Their fear was that the right-wing UWU officials would be shut-out of backroom talks with the company. This would threaten the position of unions more broadly, including those that

Solidarity is closely connected to, posing the danger that they would be excluded from the negotiating table, where they bargain away the jobs, wages and conditions of workers in exchange for the privileges of the union officialdom.

A week after workers voted “no” on January 15, Solidarity got the “union ballot” that it had been hoping for. The indicative union poll, on January 22, was called by the UWU to nullify the previous “no” vote, and to ram through a sell-out. Workers were provided with virtually no notice that the ballot was being held, and it was marked by several glaring irregularities. For the only time in some seven votes, workers supposedly ratified the agreement. But by the union’s own admission, more than 100 ballots had been discounted as “duplicates.”

Solidarity immediately joined with Coles and the UWU in declaring that the dubious union ballot, which had no legal standing, meant that the dispute was over.

A January 24 article was headlined “Heroic fight, but union inaction helps Coles starve Smeaton Grange back to work.” Solidarity again bemoaned the “inaction” of the union, apologetically claiming that its collaboration in Coles’ attacks on workers was the result of a “lack of strategy” and a “failure to take the lockout seriously.”

The defeat was unfortunate, but workers would need to accept that “the officials finally killed the dispute.” As an afterthought, Solidarity recalled that the agreement had still not been ratified in an official, legally-mandated ballot. But no matter. “[W]orkers should go back in holding their heads high. There will be another tough fight ahead after a return to work.”

This was the line of the company and the union, but not of the workers. At the formal ballot on February 2, they voted down the sell-out, demonstrating a growing mood of opposition to the union, and in favour of a genuine struggle to defend jobs and conditions.

This is what Solidarity is seeking to prevent. It is collaborating closely with “Concerned Workers of Smeaton Grange,” a handful of delegates at the site, who are integrated into the union apparatus. They have called for “no” votes in several of the ballots, but they have refrained from publicly criticising the UWU leadership and have collaborated with the officials at a series of meetings on the site. The group reserves its hostility for Socialist Equality Party campaigners, seeking, on behalf of the union and Coles, to prevent them from speaking with workers. This has included threatening to call the police on SEP campaigners.

At the same time, Solidarity is promoting fraudulent “pickets” at a handful of other Coles warehouses. Limited in duration to two hours, and timed to occur at the quietest time of operations, these are stunts, aimed at promoting the illusion that a struggle is underway within the framework of the union, when it is not, and at letting off steam. Solidarity has promoted such pickets, which have only occurred on a handful of occasions, as an adjunct to the UWU’s attempts to strike a deal with Coles management.

The record demonstrates that Solidarity is a secondary agency of the union. Speaking for affluent layers of the upper-middle class, the pseudo-left are increasingly integrated into the union bureaucracy and allied politically with the big business Labor Party.

Solidarity is distinguished from other pseudo-left groups, only by the fact that its support for Labor and its backing of the union bureaucracy is particularly crass. The organisation has extensive connections to the Maritime Union of Australia, which has presided over the destruction of thousands of jobs on the waterfront, and openly promotes collaboration with Labor Party groups.

Solidarity’s intervention at Smeaton Grange is directed against the perspective advanced by the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*, which presents the only way forward for workers.

The SEP has called for a complete break with the UWU, and the establishment of independent rank-and-file committees at Smeaton Grange, across Coles and Woolworths facilities and throughout the warehousing sector. These would be tasked with coordinating industrial and political action to defend all of the jobs and prevent the slated closures.

The SEP has insisted that this is a political fight, directed, not only against company management, but the corporate elite, the government, Labor, the unions and the Fair Work laws that they all use to prevent any collective action by workers.

A fight at Coles and Woolworths can only be successful as part of a broader political movement of the working class, directed against the austerity agenda of the ruling elites everywhere, who are seeking to make ordinary people pay for the crisis of capitalism.

This directly poses the necessity for a socialist program. The only viable perspective for the defence of jobs and conditions in the warehousing sector is for Coles, Woolworths, the banks and the major corporations to be placed under public ownership and democratic workers’ control.

Solidarity occasionally claims to be socialist. But at Smeaton Grange, as elsewhere, it shares the same pro-capitalist perspective as the union and Coles, both of which insist that automation means that job destruction cannot be opposed.

The SEP advances a diametrically opposed program. As it explained in a recent statement: “[A]utomation does not inevitably lead to sackings and worsened conditions. Under capitalism, it is used to slash labour costs and drive up profits. But automation—an expression of the development of society’s productive capacity—should be used to lighten the load of workers, allowing them to work fewer hours without a reduction in pay, and to improve health and safety conditions.

“The resources for such a development exist. They have been created by the labour of the working class. But society’s wealth is monopolised by a tiny capitalist oligarchy, defended by the entire political and media establishment, including the unions.

“The only alternative is the fight for a workers’ government and for socialism.”



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