

Australian students call for support for locked-out Coles warehouse workers

Our correspondents
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University students in Victoria have spoken out to back the critical stand taken by the locked-out Coles warehouse workers in rejecting a sell-out deal struck with the company by the United Workers Union (UWU).

The students, members of the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the youth movement of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP), commented on last week's video by Coles chief operations officer Matt Swindells, in which he announced an "indefinite" extension of a three-month lockout of the 350 workers at the company's Smeaton Grange facility in southwestern Sydney.

In a highly revealing broadcast to the locked-out workers, Swindells praised the UWU for seeking to ram through an enterprise agreement that would result in the closure of the warehouse and the destruction of all jobs, and bitterly denounced workers for repeatedly voting down company-UWU deals.

Equally revealingly, Swindells, one of the top managers at Coles, among Australia's largest corporations, vehemently condemned anti-union extremist socialists, by which he meant the SEP and the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS), for disrupting the company-UWU operation against the workers by getting their voices in the ears of the workers.

A Melbourne student, Brenton, said Swindells' comments had "exposed that the union is working hand-in-glove with Coles management against the interests of the workers."

The video "showed that the union and management are working together to destroy and potentially do away with most, if not all of these jobs, but it's also shown us and the workers who watch this statement and listen to it carefully that Coles management is keenly aware that the 'extreme socialist movement' has the initiative in this situation.

"Coles is very aware of the threat posed to the interests

of management and to their desire to make as much profit as they possibly can without regard to the best interests of their workers. The management is keenly aware that if workers organise themselves independently, outside of the union, and enter a struggle to intransigently fight for their interests above all else, that the company and the union are going to lose control of this situation."

That would "stand out to other workers in this industry and inspire them as well," Brenton said. "Coles management is very aware that this struggle has entered a phase that perhaps many of those people in management have never seen in their entire lives... the party's work with these workers and acting as a voice for their struggle and seeking to carry it forward, has taken it further than any of them would have expected."

Brenton described the UWU's refusal to pay strike pay to the locked-out workers as "outrageous." He said: "This union has millions of dollars that come into its coffers every year. From one side of it, the union doesn't want to give strike pay because it may give workers the idea that this is what union funds are for, that they are actually for them to carry out a struggle in their interests.

"From the understanding that the union and the management are acting as one, it makes total sense that they would deny the strike pay and support to workers who they're supposed to represent. It obviously exposes how bankrupt the unions are in terms of any claim to fundamentally be representing the workers' interests.

"They have significant amounts of money. They could have come out at an early stage in the struggle and said 'we'll support you for as long as you need to be supported, until your struggle is victorious' and of course we have seen nothing of the sort.

"It's a massive demonstration of how far the unions have degenerated in terms of any claim to be workers' organisations, let alone organisations of labour struggle.

"There is so much going on here that workers need to

observe and understand. The failure of the union to support what should be ‘their workers’ in this struggle, is something that all the workers who are in this union and more broadly throughout the community should be aware of, and should understand.”

Brenton said the role of the WSWs has been “absolutely crucial throughout this struggle.” Many workers at other Coles worksites “were not even aware of this long lockout and even many of the people in the union were not aware that this was going on until they came into contact with someone from the SEP.”

“Workers need their own organisations of struggle where these issues can be freely raised and discussed instead of being suppressed by unions and or management. Workers are entitled to a full appraisal of the facts in order to make up their own minds about what should be done in their workplaces or more broadly in society.

“It’s high time that workers move outside of these organisations, which seek to control what information or knowledge they have access to, and their awareness of the struggles of their class brothers and sisters throughout the same industry or throughout the country or the world.”

Jack, a student from regional Victoria, said the Coles video “clearly demonstrated the union’s connection to the corporation, not supporting workers at all. For about three months, they haven’t had any strike pay from the union that actually has a lot of money in its hands.

“I thought it was really interesting to see a management director responding to workers in that way, how unsettling for them is the work done by the WSWs in providing a platform for the workers. Swindells said a slim minority of people swung the vote ... But no, you didn’t have a slim minority for three months, producing a ‘no’ vote on six occasions! It wasn’t a one-off incident.”

Jack said Coles is “in the process of automation of the warehouses, so it would see enormous layoffs of the workers. That’s not the way we should be using automation, replacing human beings with machines to produce profit. But if you had an enterprise that was run on social need, you’d be utilising both humans and machines to produce the best outcome for society.”

“The caste of unions in our society is not going to look out for workers’ interests. Again and again over the decades they’ve demonstrated that. Workers need to create their own organisations to fight for their own interests. It’s one of necessity. If it’s not done, no one else is going to do it. It’s not going to come out of the sky and be thrust upon the workers from out of nowhere.

“We don’t have to look far. We can look across the world where workers are being forced back into workplaces during a deadly pandemic. Rank-and-file committees are leading the opposition to that policy, because unions are not.”

Jack opposed the perspective advanced by the pseudo-left Solidarity group that unions can be pressured into opposing management by enough resistance from rank-and-file workers. “These organisations—the Labor Party, the unions and the pseudo-left organisations—have a long history of aligning with capital. They have a comfortable position within the capitalist framework and continue to produce no genuine opposition to the system.”

Another student said the Coles workers’ vote showed that “people are wising up to the fact that the unions don’t represent them. And the fact that these locked-out workers have been starved for three months now and they aren’t giving up speaks to the level of determination they have.”

Thanks to the WSWs, “it’s easier for this information to get out and that would make a big difference to Coles workers across the country. I know there are other rank-and-file committees, and they have the potential to join with each other because their struggle is ultimately part of the same struggle, and the more they act the more it will inspire workers to act.

“The fact that the Coles chief of operations acknowledged the socialists goes to show that their work is having an effect. The management wouldn’t drop the ‘S’ word if it wasn’t having an effect, producing corporate frustration and nervousness.”



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