

Australian educators support locked out Coles workers

Our reporters
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In comments to the *World Socialist Web Site*, teachers have spoken out in defence of 350 Coles workers who are being subjected to an indefinite lock out at the company's Smeaton Grange warehouse in southwestern Sydney. The educators hailed the stand of the workers, who have resisted attempts by the company and the United Workers Union (UWU) to force through a sell-out deal for the past three months.

The UWU today concluded yet another "indicative" ballot of union members on a Coles enterprise agreement offer that has remained substantially unchanged since the dispute began. The vote follows repeated rejections of the deal in earlier ballots.

Coles has declared that it will provide no concessions and is trying to enforce, with the assistance of the union, an agreement that would result in the closure of Smeaton Grange, the destruction of all or most of the jobs, a marginal wage increase in the meantime and inadequate redundancy provisions, denying workers recompense for years or decades of service.

The repeated ballots called by the union are aimed at wearing workers down and compelling them to ratify an agreement they have repeatedly rejected. This has gone hand in hand with the UWU's isolation of the workers, its refusal to take action at any other facility operated by Coles or its chief rival Woolworths, and its rejection of calls for strike pay.

David, a teacher in central New South Wales:

I salute the courage of workers at Coles Smeaton Grange in rejecting the unfair and insulting deal that Coles has offered you, despite pressure from your union to accept. I wholly support your fight to prevent the planned closure of the facility, the destruction of jobs, and against the attacks on your pay and conditions. Retail workers everywhere are suffering these same attacks on their rights and your struggle

against this massive corporation is shared internationally. I encourage you to unite with your colleagues in every Coles branch, as well as workers in Woolworths in a joint struggle for your common interests.

Frank, retired secondary teacher in Melbourne:

It's important that Smeaton Grange workers have consistently voted against the Coles agreement despite being starved during the lockout by the UWU refusing to pay strike pay. Coles manager Swindells' video acknowledges that the union is in the company's pocket and the workers are therefore in a struggle against the company and the union. As well they confront the government that enforces the Fair Work Australia laws.

In spite of their courageous struggle, Coles workers at Smeaton Grange cannot just leave it at voting down the agreement. They should fight to form a rank and file committee, independent of the unions, unifying with their brothers and sisters in other workplaces around the country who are facing similar attacks on their jobs and conditions.

Martin Wolterding, PhD:

Since 2020, workers at the Coles' Smeaton Grange distribution warehouse centre in southwestern Sydney have been rejecting proposals put to them by Coles and the UWU. In doing so they implicitly rejected the union as their representative. Little wonder, as the role of UWU in this dispute has been to demoralise and wear down workers, claiming the closure and resultant job losses are "inevitable."

On at least seven separate occasions Coles employees rejected proposals put forward by Coles and the UWU, as they would provide for the shutdown of the warehouse and the loss of up to 350 jobs. The repeated rejection of the Coles/UWU sell-out is resulting in a

crisis for both the company and the union.

Coming to the aid of the workers, the Socialist Equality Party has outlined an alternative to the UWU's plans for a "just transition"—i.e., the closure of the warehouse in 2023 and the destruction of most, if not all, of the workers' jobs. On November 19, in response to a 24-hour strike at the facility and threat of unspecified "rolling action," Coles imposed a three-month lockout.

It is time for the workers to completely renounce the job cutting agenda of Coles and the UWU. It is time to form an entirely new organisation of struggle composed of independent rank and file committees of the workers themselves. Moreover, these Coles employees must reach out to other workers in other fields and begin coordinating a genuine political and industrial counter-offensive against these company-union attacks.

Campbell Pallot, a teacher in Horsham, Victoria:

I write in solidarity with and support of the Coles Smeaton Grange workers who are currently locked out of work, and in response to the recent Vimeo presentation made by Matt Swindells, Chief Operations Officer, Coles. This video contains open threats and distortions that need to be addressed. And this is not coming from someone who has no experience in these matters.

Forty one years ago, in 1980, after more than 12 months of strike action to support teaching colleagues facing forced transfers, 22 of us were locked out of work for 6 weeks. Leading up to this time, the union had been encouraging all rank and file teachers to take a solid line to protect teachers. Once we were locked out, the union did an about-face and refused to call for statewide support, basically turning their backs on us.

Interestingly, this event occurred just 12 month prior to the PATCO Air Controllers strike in the US. Little were we aware at that time that there were major, tectonic shifts in the role of union bureaucracies across the globe, aligning themselves, as they have done since, with management and corporate/government entities. In Australia, similar events also led up to the Hawke/Keating Accord where effectively, striking in protection of conditions and wages was made illegal.

This has continued to evolve for the last 40 years. The trust in unions over that time has fully eroded. There are now countless examples, in Australia and internationally, of how the unions have become the

policing arm of the corporations/government, getting well remunerated for their actions in keeping any progressive actions at bay. They are manipulative and dishonest.

Your actions in defying the union, and seeing through the dishonesty of the union are both difficult and commendable.

In regard to the video: Swindells talks of not being able to "progress voluntary redundancies" if you don't return to work, and says that the union and Coles have "a done deal." Not you! Coles and the union!

You have said no, but this is not the response they want. You are being castigated for "illegally picketing." This is the result of the Labor Party's 80s Accord. Why shouldn't workers withdraw their labour? Swindells talks of "faceless people," but these people [the Socialist Equality Party and *World Socialist Web Site*] are simply supplying the truth in the matters that are unfolding.

Where is the media on covering your plight? They are complicit with the unions, business and government in this issue. Management and the unions want their control over you, and truthful information is seen to openly contradict their plans/stories. And, here is the summation of the video: There will have to be an "extension of lockout" as management/union haven't got their way. It has to be "back under Coles' (and the unions') demands"!

Coles is planning far greater restructuring at other plants. They plan to eliminate jobs by converting their operations to Amazon-like warehouses. They need to break you to evolve these plans further. Call on other sectors to support you in this matter. Develop rank and file committees. Take this out of union hands, and place the control back into your hands.



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