

Australian union holds another “indicative” vote pushing sell-out at Coles Smeaton Grange

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The United Workers Union (UWU) has held yet another “indicative” ballot of its members at the Coles Smeaton Grange warehouse in southwestern Sydney on a sell-out agreement. The deal has remained substantially unchanged over the past three months and gives the multi-billion dollar company everything it wants.

The UWU ballot, which ran for 24 hours, concluded at 12 p.m. yesterday. The vote was the latest stage in a company-union campaign to engineer a return to work on management terms, after a now-indefinite lockout that has already spanned 13 weeks. The aim is to ensure an “orderly closure” of the warehouse that will serve as a model throughout the industry.

Coles plans to replace Smeaton Grange and four other facilities with automated warehouses, while its chief competitor Woolworths is seeking to likewise shut down three of its sites.

The Smeaton Grange workers have repeatedly rejected the proposed enterprise agreement, signalling their determination to fight the company’s attacks. They voted down a formal ballot on February 2. It was the only one of the nine votes over the course of the dispute that had any legal standing.

Coles responded by announcing an indefinite extension of the lockout, which had been due to conclude on February 11, and by declaring it would make no concessions.

The UWU immediately stepped-up its attempts to ram through the deal. It passed an indicative union vote on February 12, which asked for the agreement to be put again to the entire workforce in a company ballot, and proposed an increase in a sign-on bonus from \$1,000 to \$5,000.

The UWU officials were then cloistered in secret talks with Coles representatives for several days, before telling workers last week that even the miserly appeal for an increase in the sign-on bonus had been rejected. The company will not go higher than \$1,000, even though it has not paid the locked-out workers a wage in more than three

months. It made this declaration, demanding abject capitulation from the workers, the same week that it posted a half-year profit of \$560 million.

The UWU responded by signalling its support for the offer, made plain by its decision to put the deal to the vote of union members yesterday.

The “revised” agreement features all the company’s previous demands, including a mandate for the closure of the factory, and the destruction of most, if not all, the jobs there. The deal incorporates the various concessions given by UWU officials on the union’s inadequate initial log of claims, including a pay rise of just 3.5 percent per annum and redundancies equivalent to four weeks pay for each year of service, capped at 80 weeks.

In addition to the miserly thousand dollar sign-on payment, the union has touted supposedly expanded redundancy provisions, allowing workers to seek a voluntary redundancy at any point during the life of the agreement. But the text of the agreement, sent by Coles to workers last week, still caps the number of staff who will be granted a voluntary redundancy at 80.

Far from being given the opportunity to leave at any time, as suggested by the union, workers are instructed in the agreement that they will be able to “request” from management a voluntary redundancy at any point. That is, a request can be denied. Forced redundancies are outlined, and workers are to be given only 16 weeks’ notice before Smeaton Grange closes and they are thrown out of work.

Similar “fine print” undermines other provisions touted by Coles and the union. The company has previously claimed the deal would mandate an 80 percent–20 percent ratio of permanents to casuals, prior to the closure of Smeaton Grange. The text of the agreement says the company and the union will need to adopt a “pragmatic approach” to this ratio, and Coles requires “flexibility as we downsize the workforce.”

The union claims its indicative vote passed yesterday, but

workers were voting under duress. The UWU, which declared assets of over \$300 million at the end of the last financial year, including more than \$94 million in cash reserves, has refused to provide strike pay throughout the dispute. The company insists it will make no concessions, and the union says all it can do is hold one ballot after another on the same agreement, while the Smeaton Grange workers are hung out to dry.

Voting results sent to workers yesterday indicated that of 259 “valid votes,” 195 or 75 percent indicated “yes,” while 65, accounting for 25 percent, registered a “no.” Five votes were discounted.

The margin is greater than in earlier union polls, and there were fewer “duplicate ballots” tossed out than in a dubious UWU ballot in January. Nevertheless, it remains the case that the only three polls in which a majority reportedly voted “yes” for the agreement were unofficial ones conducted by the UWU.

Workers who spoke to the WSWS said numbers of UWU members had voted in favour because they need to return to work to receive a wage and fear a months-long extension of the lockout. One worker said as many as 86 union members did not cast a ballot. He said he did not vote, because it was effectively a ballot on whether to have another ballot.

The indicative union poll clears the way for the company to set up an official ballot. As has been the case previously, the UWU and the company will use the union vote to place maximum pressure on workers to ratify the deal.

Coles quickly sent a “Team Member Information & Voting Pack” to workers yesterday announcing the company ballot. The document contemptuously presents Coles’ conduct, in a dispute that has involved a three-month lockout, as being generous and of benefit to the workers.

The document demands that workers ratify the agreement, and threatens that some terms may be withdrawn if there is another “no” vote. It repeatedly references the benefits of workers returning to the job, i.e., that they will receive a wage, in an attempt to exploit the increasing financial hardship caused by three months without pay from the company or the union.

The text of the enterprise agreement, which was also sent out, explicitly raises the threat of victimisations. Under the heading of “other matters,” it declares: “Whilst we appreciate tensions can run high during industrial disputes, there have unfortunately been incidents of inappropriate behaviour, including picketing and other related activities... This should never have occurred and serves no purpose.”

The company, it states, will not “terminate” or take “disciplinary measures” against workers who protested the attack on their rights and conditions, but only “on the condition all the terms of this offer are agreed and the UWU

undertake the immediate cessation of this action and no further action will be taken for the remainder of the dispute.”

This is a demand for complete surrender.

The experiences of the past three months have demonstrated that workers cannot defend any of their interests within the framework of the UWU, which functions as a police force of management. The union has done everything to isolate the workers and wear them down, to prevent any broader struggle and to force through a sell-out.

The Socialist Equality Party has called for a continued rejection of the deal. But a campaign for “no” votes in the forthcoming ballots can go forward only if it is linked to a broader perspective.

Workers at Smeaton Grange should appeal to their colleagues at the Eastern Creek facility and at other warehouses to come to their aid and to join them in a unified industrial and political struggle against the slated closures and job cuts. This can only proceed outside the straitjacket of the union and its defenders.

Independent rank-and-file committees are needed to enable the widest democratic discussion among workers, free from the interference of the officials. Plans must be made for strike action throughout Coles and Woolworths operations.

This is a political fight, directed not only against management, but one of the country’s largest corporations, as well as the financial elite, the government, Labor, the unions and the Fair Works laws that are used to criminalise any collective action.

This line-up can be counteracted only by a political movement of the working class as a whole, based on a perspective that aims for the transfer of Coles, Woolworths, the banks and the corporations, to public ownership and democratic workers’ control. That is, a fight for workers’ governments and for socialism.



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