

Australia: Vote “no” in ballot on Coles Smeaton Grange sell-out!

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Some 350 Coles workers at the company’s Smeaton Grange warehouse in southwestern Sydney are again being compelled to vote on an agreement that they have repeatedly rejected, during a dispute that has involved a more than three months-long lockout without pay.

An online company ballot is being held tomorrow, between 8 a.m. and 2 p.m., after the United Workers Union (UWU) forced through an indicative vote of its members at the site last Friday.

As has been the case throughout the dispute, the formal trappings of democracy are a sham. The various ballots that have been held over the past three months resemble elections under a dictatorship, where there is really only one “candidate.” In the same way, workers are being told that they have only one choice, which is to ratify the sell-out. Ballot after ballot is held, until the company and the union get the result that they want.

Tomorrow’s vote is being held under conditions in which Coles has declared that it will not end the lockout and pay the workers a wage, until they accept the agreement. After three months out, workers are facing the prospect of weeks or months more, as well as threats that the already contemptuous redundancy provisions Coles has offered them, for the planned closure of the facility, could be stripped-back even further.

For its part, the UWU is telling workers that it will do nothing for them. Union officials have declared over recent weeks that they are unable to take any action, other than to engage in backroom discussions with company executives, who have already said that they will make no concessions, and to organise further votes.

In effect, the union has declared its own political bankruptcy. Claiming 150,000 members across the country and describing itself as a “super-union” that

will fight to “transform the future for working people,” in practice, the UWU works with company managements, isolates workers during disputes and ensures that there is no broader disruption to the operations of the major corporations such as Coles.

The class character of the union as a rotten bureaucratic shell that exists to feather the nests of its executives, is demonstrated by its refusal to provide any strike pay.

Workers have noted that the union is meticulous in collecting their dues money each week, which nationally brings in millions of dollars every month. But when workers are subjected to a protracted lockout, without precedent in recent years, the UWU officials, like a big business politician reneging on election promises, discover a financial black hole. The more than \$300 million that the union reported as assets at the end of the last financial year, which included over \$94 million in cash reserves, has suddenly dried up or has been earmarked for other “expenses.”

In reality, the union has sought to starve the workers into submission, in close collaboration with Coles management. The union has more or less dropped any pretence of concern over the plight of the workers, or of opposing any of Coles attacks. The UWU’s Facebook page is silent on Smeaton Grange, as is its website. Workers have said that the union has called no meetings in the lead-up to tomorrow’s vote, and has told them almost nothing.

This sell-out operation should be rejected with the contempt that it deserves. The Socialist Equality Party has called on workers to “vote no” to an agreement that provides for the closure of Smeaton Grange, the destruction of all their jobs, and gives the company what it wants on wage increases and redundancy, i.e., an agreement that throws workers on the scrapheap

while costing Coles, which recently reported over half a billion in six-month profits, as little as possible.

The “no” vote, however, must be tied to a broader struggle. Many workers recognise that rejecting the sell-out in a ballot, as critical as that is, does not of itself resolve the issues that they confront.

A fight against the sell-out must be based on the lessons of the past three months, which include:

1. Nothing can be defended through the union or within its framework. The UWU has rejected every call made by workers for a genuine struggle. It has abandoned its own paltry demands on wages and redundancies, and has adopted those of the company. The union is now pushing an agreement that explicitly forbids workers from undertaking any future struggle at Smeaton Grange. These are the actions of a police force of management, not a workers’ organisation.

2. Coles’ offensive cannot be fought at one facility alone. What is taking place at Smeaton Grange is part of a sweeping restructure by Coles, which includes plans for the imminent closure of four other warehouses after Smeaton Grange. The central strategy of management and the union, throughout the dispute has been to keep it contained at Smeaton Grange, and to isolate the workers from their colleagues who face the exact same issues.

3. Workers are posed with a struggle not just against management, but one of the country’s largest companies, the massive financial firms that own it, as well as the government and the Labor Party, which have supported its attacks. They are up against the whole framework of the Fair Work Australia industrial laws, put in place by the last Labor government and the unions, to illegalise collective action and allow companies to carry out continuous restructuring, lockouts and victimisations.

All of this demonstrates that a new perspective and new organisations are required. Anger and opposition, within the straitjacket of the UWU, is not enough.

In the first instance, a struggle against the restructure requires a movement of workers throughout Coles, linking up workers at Smeaton Grange with their thousands of colleagues across the company’s operations, especially those also facing closures. Other powerful sections of the working class are being hit with the same corporate assault, including Australia Post workers, Telstra employees and airline staff, to

name only a few. Unified action by these workers, who number tens, or even hundreds of thousands, would transform the situation.

But this is what the UWU is seeking to prevent. A broader movement can only be developed through new organisations, including rank-and-file committees at Smeaton Grange and at every other Coles facility. These would provide workers with information, a forum for democratic discussion, free from the interference of the union officials, and a vehicle to plan and take concrete actions.

Such committees could organise political and industrial action spanning multiple workplaces, including coordinated stoppages at multiple Coles warehouses. The company is operating with a national strategy, workers need their own!

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has insisted that this is a political fight, directed against the ruling elite, its representatives in the official political parties and the unions, and their program of making the working class pay for the crisis of capitalism, and returning it to the conditions that existed in the 1930s.

The need for a socialist perspective is directly posed by this dispute. The only way that the spate of closures and the continuous, pro-business restructures will be ended, is if Coles, Woolworths, the other major corporations and the banks, are placed under public ownership and democratic workers’ control. They must be operated to meet the needs of workers and of society, not the profits of the billionaire shareholders. This means the fight for a workers’ government and for socialism.

The SEP urges workers seeking to fight the sell-out to contact us today.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact