

Injured Coles Australia worker speaks out: “They’ve tried to destroy me physically, mentally and financially”

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A Coles worker who was injured on the job at one of the company’s warehouses several years ago, has spoken out against the company’s attempts to deny him compensation and his abandonment by the trade unions.

The worker contacted the WSWS after reading its coverage of the ongoing dispute at Coles’ Smeaton Grange warehouse in southwestern Sydney. He noted the parallels between his own treatment, the more than three-month lockout that the Smeaton Grange workers have been subjected to, and the attempts of the United Workers Union (UWU) to ram through a sell-out deal there in the face of substantial opposition.

Today, the Smeaton Grange workers are again being compelled to vote on an agreement that would provide for the closure of the warehouse and the destruction of their jobs, as well as the minimal wage and redundancy provisions that Coles has proposed. As in the case of the interviewee, the unions are working with management against the workers they falsely claim to represent.

The interviewed worker requested to use a pseudonym for his protection, so he will be named as John throughout.

He began by explaining that the injury occurred “during the work process. From straight away when I reported the injury I met with a brick wall. I said I was going to see my doctor. Because I was seeing my doctor they wouldn’t transport me. If I was going to their doctor they would transport me, even though they wanted to know when my appointment was and they sent somebody down there to be there to speak to my doctor.

“When my doctor said you had to have an MRI, the Coles representative said that because he’s coming to see you and you’re not one of our doctors, he’ll have to pay for the MRI. If it’s deemed it’s a work injury then he’ll get a rebate from the insurance company. So straight away they were pushing back and trying to make it difficult.

“My doctor wouldn’t have that. He said we’re not having the MRI until it’s approved by Coles, which they did four days later. The MRI proved that the injury was significant and that, as a specialist told me, I would have to have an operation. Coles sent me to a doctor in Sydney, one of their doctors who again said to me ‘You’ve got a significant injury.’ They explained it in more detail than what my own surgeon had and said ‘I’ll send my report through to Coles.’

“But when the report came through, it said ‘Not work related, should heal itself within six weeks.’ Totally different to what the doctor had said to me. He hadn’t committed that it was work related, but he certainly told me it was severe. But then that changed when the

report was prepared and he said what Coles wanted him to say. That was enough for them to deny responsibility.

“I went back to work on selective duties. I was using sick pay and long service and holiday leave to make up the difference in pay. We then basically had to fight it in the industrial commission, which took a number of months. They deemed it was definitely a work injury and the company had to take responsibility for it and approve an operation. I was operated on just over a year after I was originally set down for an operation. So they managed to drag it out for that long.

“A couple of months after the operation, I was deemed by my surgeon to be fine to go back on light duties, office work, anything like that. Coles rejected this, saying ‘We don’t have light duties here, you can only come back when you do pre-injury duties for a certain amount of time a day.’

“Some months later, I went back on four hours a day, three days a week. I had a bit of trouble with that but continued on. I had to go back to see my surgeon, which I did. He wrote a letter to Coles and said I would need a special brace which would help me carry out those duties and prevent further injury. Coles actually paid for that. But then, once the brace was fitted, I was called to the office and told that while I had it on I couldn’t work. It just went on from there. At a few stages they denied responsibility again. I had to take them back to the commission.

“It’s been going on for years and they have tried to physically, mentally and financially destroy me. They’ve come close but they have failed, only because I’ve stood up to them. I’ve heard they have done it to a lot of people and a lot of people have fallen by the wayside. That’s why they continue to do it.

“I’ve been told that I now need a different operation, because the first one wasn’t a success. As of today I have had no feedback on approval, disapproval, anything. I’ve heard nothing from Coles, and basically that is where we’re at. All the way along, every which way you turn they are putting a brick wall up, trying to cheat you out of it, just trying to make life difficult.”

Asked about the role of the unions in his case, John explained: “When I saw that Coles had denied responsibility, I contacted the National Union of Workers [NUW]. I rang, left a message. I did that two times a day for three or four days in a row. In the end, I thought, this is no good I need to do something, so I contacted an outside solicitor.

“About three or four weeks later, I got a phone call from this guy from the NUW saying ‘Can I help you?’ I said, ‘You could have three or four weeks ago but I’ve done it.’ He said ‘Oh yea, I’ve been

on holidays,' which I think is a load of rubbish. Why didn't they tell me when I phoned through he was on holiday? Something like that if he is on holidays, it shouldn't fall by the wayside. Someone else should be taking it. It was obvious they didn't want any part of it.

"Once the NUW amalgamated with United Voice a couple of years ago to form the United Workers Union, I received a message. I contacted them back and told them the story. They were all sympathetic, to the point of, 'We think we need to take this to the media,' and that sort of thing. I said 'okay, fine.' I've still got messages where they got a girl to ring me and get the story. She asked me if I'd be happy to put my name to this. I said, 'Yeah, no worries.' She said she would put something together and told me a week later: 'I've got a bit of a story here. I think it's pretty good. I've just got to get the go ahead from the union.' That was two years ago and it's the last I got from them. I've heard nothing since."

Asked to elaborate on why he thought the unions had abandoned him, John stated, "I think it has been shown with the whole Smeaton Grange dispute. They're just trying to cover their own backsides. All they're concerned about regarding workers is that they keep paying their weekly union dues. They're under the opinion that if they keep Coles fairly sweet, they're right, the money keeps coming in every week. That's all I can put it down to."

Commenting on the UWU's refusal to provide the Smeaton Grange workers with strike pay, John added, "Once again that's the union letting the workers down. That's like they have let me down with no support. They're doing exactly the same thing. You pay into the union to have support in times like this. With the amount of assets and things they've got, they should be helping the worker. It just goes to show you."

He noted that the union suppressed information and did everything it could to divide workers. "One thing that has got me is, with the union sitting on its hands, there would be people I worked with who wouldn't know where I went or what happened to me," the worker said.

"When I worked at a different warehouse 25 years ago, anything that happened to any worker, regardless of what it was, everybody knew about it, so you could stand together and do something about it.

"The union has all the way along tried to separate things. Realistically, people who had gotten injured prior to me, they just disappeared. You couldn't stand up and say 'We don't like what happened. We better do something about it.' The union has made sure that has happened all the way along, and Coles have done the same thing. That's why we are in the position we are now. Workers just go on oblivious. You can see the same with information not fed to different sheds about the Smeaton Grange lockout.

"Realistically a lot has got to be asked of the union by the workers. Why have they not done things? Why have they not brought in for the strike fund? Why have they done the things that they've done to let it get to this point?"

The unions had also presided over rapid speedups and had not objected to management placing ever greater demands on workers. Pick rates, i.e., how much product a warehouse worker must move, had increased "four or five-fold over the past few decades," John said. "The day I was injured, I think I had manually picked 9.8 tonnes of product.

"They had gone to a ten-hour day, four days a week. We were told by managers, 'Don't worry, you won't pick the product for the full ten hours a day. You'll do half a shift on that then you will go and do something else.' Because that's a lot in a ten-hour period. But that

guarantee just flew out the window. People were picking ten hours a day, four days a week, week after week after week. This is how the injury happens.

"They brought in headsets to speed it up so you basically worked like a robot. If you were getting behind the time they allotted, managers would come looking for you. You were tracked every minute of the day. They knew exactly where you were at all times, to the point where if you signed off two minutes late going to a break, for whatever reason, they knew, they were on to you. They treat you like robots."

John agreed that his experiences were one expression of a broader assault on the working class, commenting, "You get these CEOs and whatnot getting their millions of dollars in bonuses to make things more profitable. The only way to make things more profitable is making people work a lot harder.

"Wage growth over the last ten years has been very, very low. You look over that time—the price hikes in petrol, the price hikes in real estate—and there's no way an ordinary wage earner can keep up with it. Personally that's the way I think they want it. They want all these million and billionaires owning and controlling everything. For workers, it's getting back to like it was in the 1920s and 30s in Sydney, where most people had to rent a place, as it was then it was hard to get work during the Depression.

"The first sign that somebody couldn't pay their rent, they were out on the street and they put somebody else in that house. It seems to me that's how they want to get it back to because they are just making it impossible. I would hate to be starting off again now trying to buy a house. With the wages that are available now I can't see how anyone could do it."

John warned that the attempt to close Smeaton Grange, and Coles' broader restructure, which involved the closure of four other warehouses would have a devastating effect.

"With the amount of numbers, if they all band together, it's all under the one union, there's no reason why they can't get something, that they can't save their jobs. If you look at it, how many thousands of people will be out of jobs if Coles succeeds? It's not just the 2,000 or more permanent jobs at these five warehouses they're trying to close. It's the people coming through, the kids leaving school. We had a lot of casuals there doing uni. They would do two or three days a week to try to help themselves through uni. They're losing all this opportunity as well. Society is going to suffer along the way.

"By not standing together, the unions are just letting it happen. It's going to affect generation after generation. Once something is gone, you don't get it back. We've seen that for years. I'm disgusted how the unions have got it this way."



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