

Australian pseudo-left Solidarity group covers up union sell-out at Coles Smeaton Grange

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Throughout the recently concluded dispute at Coles Smeaton Grange warehouse in southwestern Sydney, the pseudo-left Solidarity group claimed that workers could defend their interests by placing pressure on officials from the United Workers Union (UWU) to “take action.”

Solidarity insisted that workers had to remain within the framework of the UWU. It opposed calls for the establishment of independent rank-and-file committees and a broader struggle against Coles’ restructure, along with the political forces overseeing it, including the federal government, Labor and the unions. Instead, all that was required was to appeal to the UWU leaders to adopt a vague and unspecified “militant” stance.

Solidarity continued to promote this line, as the UWU isolated the workers during the course of a three-month lockout, refused to provide them with any strike pay, despite declared assets of more than \$300 million, and collaborated ever more openly with management to impose a sell-out that would give the multi-billion dollar supermarket giant everything that it wanted.

On February 27, the UWU rammed through a pro-company enterprise agreement, in the tenth or eleventh ballot of workers on a deal that remained substantially unchanged throughout the dispute. It provides for the closure of Smeaton Grange, which is one of five Coles warehouses slated for replacement by two new automated facilities; the destruction of all of the jobs there, and the miserly wage and redundancy provisions demanded by management.

As the final touches on the betrayal were being worked out by UWU officials and senior managers, Solidarity went silent. Its last article, prior to February 27, was a brief report published on February 11. This dovetailed with the attempts of the union, the company and the corporate press to bury any mention of the sell-out underway and to prevent a struggle against it.

When the deal was ratified, Solidarity remained mum. For well over a week, the organisation said nothing about the end of a dispute that it had been heavily involved in. Instead Solidarity published articles hailing the UWU’s claims to be leading a struggle in defence of wages at the McCormick sauce factory in Melbourne. The fact that the UWU officials had just betrayed one of the longest industrial disputes in recent decades did not rate a mention, in an article that read as though it were a press release drafted by the union officials themselves.

Only on March 7 did Solidarity publish its post-mortem of the defeat at Smeaton Grange, in a cynical and mealy-mouthed piece that was buried at the bottom of its website.

The tenor of the article is summed up by its introductory line: “The United Workers Union has a well-deserved reputation among the union movement for organising and militancy. James Supple examines what went wrong at Smeaton.”

The UWU was only founded in 2019, through a merger of two existing unions. Those who claim that it is a “militant” force are the wealthy bureaucrats that run the organisation and corporate publications that uncritically echo their assertions. Solidarity could not point to a single

“militant” struggle that the UWU has led to this date, but it has already racked up a number of rotten betrayals in its 24 months of existence.

The article begins with a contradiction that its author makes no attempt to resolve. The sell-out, it states, was a “defeat,” a “failure” of the UWU leadership and “shameful.” But, supposedly, the workers, and by extension the union, were able to wrest one concession from Coles after another.

“Although the company continually insisted it had made its final offer, every no vote brought more concessions,” Solidarity declares. It is unable to elaborate on these so-called successes, which exist only in the lying statements of company managers and union bureaucrats.

The only concrete “concession” that Solidarity identifies is the supposed agreement of the company “to an unlimited number of voluntary redundancies, so workers can leave with a payout and accept a new job offer at any time before the centre closes in 2023.”

Even if this were the case, its transparent purpose would be to ensure the speedy shutdown of Smeaton Grange and the destruction of the jobs there. But, as Solidarity is no doubt aware, this “concession” is also a union-management lie. The text of the agreement still caps voluntary redundancies at 80 positions, meaning at least 270 workers will be sacked.

The article rapidly moved on to answer the question posed in the introduction to the article. Why had the “militancy” of the UWU faltered at Smeaton Grange? The response was entirely superficial. “The UWU never took Coles’ lockout seriously,” it failed to “back Smeaton Grange,” etc.

This echoes Solidarity’s earlier descriptions of the UWU’s sordid manoeuvres as a “tragedy,” as though some sort of misunderstanding or psychological weakness was to account for the perfidy of the bureaucrats.

The purpose is to present a completely distorted account of the dispute. Solidarity bemoans the fact that while the UWU officials did not take the dispute “seriously,” “the company poured resources into defeating the union.”

In fact, the company had no need to “defeat the union.” Management and the UWU were partners throughout the dispute, as was publicly acknowledged by senior Coles executives.

First of all, the UWU agreed, prior to any consultation with workers, that Smeaton Grange would be subjected to an orderly closure and all of the jobs there destroyed. Then, it claimed that the sole issue was to try to secure “fair redundancies,” i.e., to work out the terms of surrender, a position that Solidarity has promoted throughout.

Far from fighting for a “just transition,” the union proceeded to wear workers down so that they would accept the company’s terms of closure. Over the course of three months, the UWU dropped all of its initial log of claims as it isolated the workers, ensured the unhindered functioning of every other Coles facility, and literally sought to starve the Smeaton Grange staff out by denying them strike pay.

The union bureaucrats were very explicit that they would do nothing other than call endless ballots on an agreement that workers had already

rejected, and hold secret talks with management. Under no conditions would they open their substantial coffers to prevent the locked-out staff from being utterly pauperised. The workers would have to submit to management if they wanted to begin receiving a wage. In other words, contrary to the pathetic apologies of Solidarity, this was a particularly brutal and naked sell-out operation.

Solidarity's tortured explanations serve one over-riding purpose: to insist that there are no fundamental lessons to be learned from what took place at Smeaton Grange and to prevent a break with the unions.

Supple reports that "Following the dispute, 'the workers of Smeaton feel intense feelings of betrayal, disgust and dismay at the union,' as one worker put it. Some workers have even suggested leaving the union."

As far as Solidarity is concerned, this would be a crime, far worse than anything the UWU officials had carried out. It warns: "[L]eaving the union will only weaken workers' organisation at the workplace, making it harder to organise against victimisation and management attacks on the workforce when everyone goes back." In other words, workers who reject the UWU will be aiding management attacks.

This stands reality on its head. No serious attempt is made to explain how paying dues to an organisation that is collaborating in the destruction of their jobs, and that has just hung them out to dry for three months, will help workers to fight against "victimisations."

Supple attempts to square the circle by declaring that "the solution is to build independent rank-and-file organisations." Such organisations will not be "independent" in any sense, certainly not of the UWU. Instead, they will function "within the union" and "can work with the officials when they do the right thing, and pressure them or act independently when necessary."

In other words, Solidarity is calling for ginger groups that can supposedly spur the union officials to action and stiffen their spine. The concrete example that it presents shows that in reality such organisations play a very different role. They function as a safety valve to let off steam, keep opposition within the confines of the union and prevent the development of genuine independent organisations of struggle.

Solidarity hails the record of the "Concerned Workers of Smeaton Grange," a group that it helped establish, involving a handful of delegates who were close to the UWU officials.

What did the activity of this group consist of?

Firstly, they insisted among their colleagues that it would be impermissible to publicly criticise the officials, because this would be an attack on "union solidarity."

Secondly, the delegates in charge of the group were entrusted by the UWU officials with running meetings of workers, at which the sordid manoeuvres of the union leadership were justified. The union bureaucrats were too hated to show their faces.

Thirdly, the delegates involved acted as a police force for the UWU leadership, threatening members of the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* who attended the Smeaton Grange picket, and demanding that other workers who came to offer their support, leave immediately.

And finally, the group shut up shop as the sell-out was finalised, declaring that the dispute was over and nothing more could be done. In other words, this was not a rank-and-file committee in any genuine sense of the term, but an appendage of the UWU whose aim was to prevent the establishment of such a committee.

Solidarity claims that it is possible for workers to pressure the union officials to adopt a "militant" and "class struggle" policy, but the lesson of the Smeaton Grange dispute is the exact opposite. The more workers shifted to the left, and placed pressure on the union, as reflected in repeated rejections of the sell-out agreement, the more openly the UWU collaborated with management against its own members.

This is not an accident or solely the product of the perfidy of individual

officials. Solidarity's entire argument is directed against the scientific Marxist assessment of the unions developed by the SEP and the WSW.

The unions have always defended the profit system. In an earlier period, when capitalism was regulated within the framework of the nation-state, they performed this function by placing pressure on employers and governments to grant limited social concessions to the working class.

The globalisation of production, beginning in the 1980s, destroyed the objective basis for this national-reformist program. The unions, taking their pro-capitalist and nationalist program to its logical conclusion have become the chief proponents of ensuring the "international competitiveness" of their "own" national industries by imposing continuous cuts to the wages, conditions and jobs of workers. This has been accompanied by the ever-greater enrichment of the union officials, many of whom earn six-figure salaries, sit on the boards of multi-billion dollar superannuation funds and receive funds from the companies they claim to be in struggle against.

This assessment, now confirmed by decades of experience, has been fully borne out at Smeaton Grange.

The events of the past months have again demonstrated that workers can only advance their interests through a complete break with the unions. New organisations of struggle, entirely independent of the unions, must be established at all workplaces. These would enable democratic discussion among workers, free from the interference of the union officials, the sharing of information and coordinated industrial and political action across entire industries.

What is required is not just an organisational break, but a political one. Any genuine militant action seeking to mobilise broad layers of workers necessitates a political struggle against the entire straitjacket of industrial laws. This includes enterprise bargaining, which divides employees workplace by workplace, and draconian Fair Work Australia legislation. Both were introduced by Labor and the unions to create the conditions for continuous pro-business restructuring and to prevent any collective action by the working class in response.

A new perspective is required which rejects the "right" of the major corporations to destroy jobs, wages and conditions to drive up the profits of ultra-wealthy shareholders. The only viable program to defeat the restructure at Coles and to defend jobs, is one that aims at the transfer of the company, along with all of the major corporations and the banks, to public ownership and democratic workers' control.

That means a fight against capitalism and the austerity agenda of all of the political forces that defend it, including the government, Labor, the unions and their pseudo-left accomplices. It requires a struggle for workers' governments and for socialism by a political movement of the entire working class.

Solidarity, speaking for an affluent layer of the upper middle-class, increasingly integrated into the corrupt union apparatus, is intensely hostile to this perspective.



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