

Strong response to call for independent rank-and-file committees

Watch SEP meeting video: “The Coles Smeaton Grange struggle: The next stage for the working class”

Our reporter
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Last Sunday, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) held a public meeting reviewing the political lessons of the more than three-month lockout of Coles workers at the company’s Smeaton Grange warehouse in southwestern Sydney.

The event was attended by almost 90 people, including postal and warehousing workers, as well as teachers and students in Australia, along with participants from New Zealand and Sri Lanka.

Late last month, the Smeaton Grange workers were starved into accepting a sellout agreement by the United Workers Union (UWU), which isolated their locked out members, refusing to provide strike pay or organise any support for industrial action by other Coles workers.

The return-to-work agreement, which had been consistently rejected by workers during the lockout, ratified the closure of the warehouse and the axing of all its jobs in exchange for a paltry wage and redundancy deal demanded by the multi-billion dollar supermarket corporation.

The determined struggle of the Smeaton Grange workers bluntly exposed the unions as an industrial police force, highlighting the urgent need for a new strategy and organisations of working class struggle.

Sunday’s meeting, which can be watched below was, and remains, the only public event examining the longest industrial dispute in Australia’s largest city in decades.

SEP National Secretary Cheryl Crisp, who chaired the meeting, opened by explaining how big business and the ruling elites everywhere were using COVID-19 to boost profits and drive up productivity through a massive “restructuring” assault on the entire working class.

It is necessary for workers to understand how and why the Smeaton Grange workers were betrayed, she said. “Workers must know who are their friends and who are their enemies and the perspective necessary to ensure this betrayal is not repeated.”

John Hughes, an Australia Post worker and a founding member of the Postal Workers Rank and File Committee, pointed to the “clear parallels” between Coles workers and “what we are up against at Australia Post.”

Formation of the Australia Post rank-and-file committee was in response to the unions’ collaboration with management’s so-called Alternative Delivery Model restructuring, he said. The union negotiated an agreement that endorsed the elimination of thousands of jobs and contained a 12-month no-strike clause.

“Workers are going through some very painful experiences and they are starting to recognise that it is no longer possible to conduct a struggle against the ruling class within the framework of the old organisations,” Hughes said.

Sue Phillips, a veteran teacher and convenor of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), told the meeting that the brutal assault on Coles warehouse workers was mirrored in the decades-long attack on the jobs and working conditions of university academics, teachers and other education staff. These attacks, she said, have been rubber-stamped by the education unions.

Phillips reviewed the massive shift in government funding from public to private education institutions, along with the destructive impact of NAPLAN testing, business curriculums and so-called super schools on teachers and students.

“Increasingly public schools are not institutions of learning and education, but holding pens where young people are not taught the joy of learning, encouraged to excel academically and be creative, critical thinkers, but to obey orders and be ‘work-ready’ in low-paid, casual, gig economy jobs.

“The dire situation facing young people is highlighted by the 23 percent increase in recruitment to the armed forces in Australia in the last year,” she continued. “What does it say of a system which offers its young only military service and war and where, under conditions of mass unemployment, this appears as the only prospect of a permanent job?”

SEP National Committee member and *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) journalist Oscar Grenfell provided a detailed exposure of the UWU’s betrayal and warned that massive job destructive would now be unleashed against Coles and other supermarket warehouse workers.

Most importantly, Grenfell explained the role of the pseudo-left Solidarity organisation, and its so-called “Concerned Workers of Smeaton Grange” group, which covered up for the UWU and

opposes any organisational or political break with the unions.

According to Solidarity, the speaker said, “The union leaders will generally ‘do the right thing’ by their members. But if they don’t, all that is required is a little bit of a push by the rank-and-file and the officials will respond.

“How did this play out at Smeaton Grange? In fact, the more opposition emerged from workers, the closer the union collaborated with management. Each time workers voted down the sell-out, the UWU officials and the company ramped up the pressure on them to capitulate.”

Grenfell reviewed the corporate transformation of the unions into industrial police for employers, which, he said, was ruthlessly imposed by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments but was an international phenomenon.

“When we call for independent rank-and-file committees, we are raising the need for workers to begin developing their own organisations that they control and lead entirely independent of the unions. Their role is not to pressure the unions or write letters of protest to the Labor Party...

“Such organisations would ensure workers were fully informed of events in their workplace and more broadly by distributing information, provide a forum for democratic discussion and debate among workers, and serve as a vehicle to plan concrete actions, including unified industrial action across industries and involving broader sections of workers,” he explained.

Grenfell said workers confronted not just one company but a fight against the entire political establishment, the trade unions apparatus, and the capitalist state, which posed the need for a political struggle for socialist internationalism and a workers’ government.

Following the reports, questions were asked about the organisational form and political tasks of rank-and-file committees, the role of the pseudo-left, and union attempts to divert workers into so-called community boycotts.

One Coles warehouse worker pointed out there was widespread anger over the UWU’s betrayal of the Smeaton Grange workers. He also noted that the union had not informed workers at his warehouse about management’s closure plans until after it had pushed through an enterprise agreement.

Speaking after the event, he told the WSWS that the meeting was “very informative” and added, “We need to share the video of this everywhere we can.

“I thought the report by Sue Phillips from the Committee to For Public Education was fantastic,” he said. “I learnt a lot more about the struggles teachers have been involved in—the cuts to jobs and conditions—and how NAPLAN is used to dumb down children.

“What she said about pushing people into the military is right. There’s one kid I know who applied to join the armed forces and has now got various trade qualifications. It looks very inviting but his life is going to be at risk, he’ll be just another cog in the war machine, another statistic.

“The government doesn’t want people to think but just follow the narratives they lay down in the media. If you look carefully into what’s really going on though, then you see capitalism for what it really is. The real agenda is for the working class to be the slaves of the corporates and the one-percenters.

“I’ve looked at the Solidarity group’s article. What they’re proposing is crazy. How can you start a genuine rank-and-file committee controlled by workers and still be in the union framework? It’s not possible because the union is tied to the company. You saw that in [Coles Chief Operations Officer] Matt Swindell’s video. He was so blatant about how much they rely on the union. And anyone who didn’t agree with what Coles management and the union worked out, he said, was an extremist.

“I’m disgusted with what I see happening all around in the world. There’s the injustice at Coles Smeaton Grange but there’s a bigger agenda that you people are trying to educate us about. It’s really like a veil has been lifted about what’s going on in the world.”

Sam, a Brisbane high school student, was also enthusiastic about the meeting. “The attempted restructuring at the Smeaton Grange warehouse is only the most recent example in a long chain of anti-worker, pro-corporate developments. Especially illuminating was the role of the UWU in isolating the warehouse workers and forcing them to accept the terms dictated by Coles. This demonstrates the need for workers to establish their own democratic organisations, separate from established trade unions, in order to advance their demands independently.

“The report by the CFPE about the deteriorating state of public education was also interesting. Both Labor and Liberal governments are attempting to turn public schools into institutions that create ‘job-ready’ graduates, rather than institutions that encourage students to learn and pursue topics that interest them.

“The current crisis in global capitalism, which has been catalysed by the COVID-19 pandemic, can only be solved by a mass movement of the working class. We are entering an era that is becoming more and more defined by rising austerity, militarism and authoritarianism. The only cure for capitalism is socialism, and socialism can only be built by the working class.”

We urge meeting participants and WSWS readers to watch the video and share it widely on social media and other platforms. Sunday’s event and future meetings provide a crucial platform for workers, young people, students and serious layers of the middle class to clarify and democratically discuss the political issues they now confront.



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