

United Workers Union isolating McCormick Foods Australia strike

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A strike by almost 100 workers at a McCormick Foods Australia plant, in southeastern Melbourne, is in its fourth week, with the strikers demonstrating their determination to fight sweeping company attacks on their pay and conditions.

But the United Workers Union (UWU), which covers the site, is isolating the workers and doing nothing to mobilise its claimed 150,000 members across the country in support of them. The union is seeking to limit opposition to a picket outside the factory, is not providing regular strike pay, and is begging management to “sit down” with the UWU officials and “make a fair offer.”

The UWU is reprising the role it played at Coles’ Smeaton Grange warehouse in southwestern Sydney. For over three months of the Coles lockout, the union hung the workers out to dry on a picket line, ensuring that production continued unhindered at every other Coles facility. Moreover, it refused to provide strike pay, in a bid to literally starve the workers into accepting a sell-out. On February 27, the UWU pushed through Coles’ enterprise agreement, providing for the closure of the facility, the destruction of all 350 jobs, and a return to work on management terms.

This is a warning of what the union is seeking to impose on the McCormick workers.

The strike there began on February 26, in response to the company’s demands for a new enterprise agreement which, according to the UWU, would slash the take-home pay of some workers by up to \$500 per week and gut long standing working conditions. These latest attacks follow a five-year wage freeze.

The company’s main aim is to abolish the four-day working week, which has been in place for decades. This would allow for a major reduction in overtime pay and the introduction of a night shift. McCormick also wants a cap of 10 years on redundancy payouts, even though many workers have been employed at the factory for more than

double that length of time.

McCormick Foods Australia is a subsidiary of a Fortune 1,000 corporation—one of the largest producers of herbs and spices in the world. Globally, McCormick has 13,000 employees and annual revenues of more than \$4 billion. It is based in Hunt Valley in the US state of Maryland.

The Melbourne plant supplies condiments to fast-food outlets KFC, McDonalds, Hungry Jacks and Subway, as well as the supermarket chains Aldi, Woolworths and Costco.

WSWS reporters spoke to strikers at the picket last Saturday. One, who has worked at the plant for more than 10 years said: “We’ve come out and we have to keep going otherwise we’ve wasted our time. The four-day week is important as we’ve made our lives around it.

“The company wants to get rid of that so they can bring in three shifts on the busier lines and reduce overtime payments. There are a lot of other conditions that they are trying to remove.”

Another long-standing worker said: “We worked very hard last year. They should just leave us alone. People with small kids and mortgages are finding it difficult. Electricity prices go up every few months. We are seeing trucks going in and out. We’re not sure if they’re making product, but nobody’s going back to work.”

As at Smeaton Grange, the UWU officials responded with intense hostility to the presence of WSWS reporters and Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaigners at the picket. One declared that any criticism of the UWU was illegitimate because workers “are the union” and demanded that the WSWS and SEP leave.

The officials were particularly opposed to any discussion of their recent betrayal at Smeaton Grange. They claimed that the disputes were entirely unrelated, and that the outcome at the Coles warehouse had been because the company was able to continue operations in pop-up sheds, using casual labour. The union bureaucrats

did not mention that the company was only able to do this because the UWU allowed it to do so. The thrust of their argument, moreover, was that there was no need for an expansion of the struggle at the McCormick plant.

In a striking expression of the contempt for workers among the privileged officials, one UWU organiser took exception to the WSWS's exposure of the refusal of the union to provide the Smeaton Grange staff with strike pay during the lockout.

This was false, the organiser said. The workers had been given three \$200 supermarket vouchers, and if they had financial problems they were able to "apply" for assistance. The vouchers amounted to \$600, or less than half a week's pay, over the course of a 14-week lockout. Many Coles workers were compelled to deplete their savings and their superannuation to survive, while others were forced to look for work elsewhere. There was intense anger over the refusal of the union to provide strike pay.

The UWU organiser at McCormick added that there was nothing the union could have done, because its assets were tied up in property and were not liquid. In fact, the UWU declared cash reserves of over \$94 million last June, as part of an asset base of more than \$300 million. In the 2019–20 financial year, the union paid affiliation fees and donations of \$706,000 to the big business Labor Party. "Employee expenses" and "indirect employment expenses" totalled \$48.5 million.

At the McCormick plant, the union is again refusing to provide strike pay. It has called an online "community fundraiser," and has thus far offered workers one-off payments of \$300, meaning they are already thousands of dollars out of pocket.

The union is calling for a "no" vote on a company ballot next week, as it did in the early stages of the Smeaton Grange dispute. Both the union and the company, however, calculate that without regular income, the workers cannot hold out indefinitely.

In addition to begging management for backroom negotiations, the UWU officials are promoting Labor Party and Australian Council of Trade Union (ACTU) officials who have been involved in sweeping attacks on workers' jobs and conditions.

The UWU welcomed Labor leader Anthony Albanese to the picket last week, providing him with a platform to posture as a supporter of the strike. Albanese's leadership has been based on assurances to big business that a Labor government would be better placed to impose a "productivity" and "growth" agenda, aimed at driving up

profits at the expense of workers.

Albanese's presence could be likened to a kiss of death. He was similarly featured at a UWU event for the Smeaton Grange dispute last December, right at the point when the union was dropping its wage claim, adopting the company's demands and preparing to impose a sell-out.

ACTU secretary Sally McManus has also been rolled out. Over the past year she has worked with the Liberal-National Coalition government and employers to force millions of workers off overtime and other entitlements, on the pretext of the pandemic, while the unions have allowed the mass sacking of millions more.

A fight for decent wages and conditions is a fight, not only against management, but also Labor, the ACTU, the UWU and the Fair Work industrial legislation they imposed in 2009, which bans collective action and provides for continuous pro-business restructuring. This is a political struggle against the austerity agenda of the entire ruling elite, including Labor and the unions.

The experiences of Smeaton Grange, and of the past 30 years, demonstrate that workers need new organisations of struggle. This requires the establishment of independent rank-and-file committees, at the McCormick plant and everywhere else, to begin a genuine industrial and political struggle involving broader sections of workers, and to defeat the union sell-out operations.

The emerging disputes pose the need for a new political perspective that rejects the corporatism of the unions. The major corporations, including McCormick, Coles, and all of the major corporations and banks, must be placed under public ownership and democratic workers' control, to meet the needs of workers and of society, not the profit interests of a tiny oligarchy. That necessitates the fight for a workers' government and for socialism.



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