

Australia: Union promotes big business Labor politicians at McCormick strike

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Workers at a McCormick sauce factory in Melbourne, who have been on strike for nearly six weeks, must take warning from a recent meeting convened by the United Workers Union, (UWU). By inviting prominent Labor and Australian Council of Trade Union (ACTU) leaders to the picket line, the UWU is giving notice that it intends to follow the same script of betrayal that recently played out at a major Coles facility.

At Coles' Smeaton Grange warehouse in Sydney, workers were locked out for some three months, as the UWU wore them down and refused to provide strike pay.

As at McCormick, Labor politicians and ACTU officials were rolled out by the UWU. While mouthing platitudes of support, their function was to maintain the isolation imposed on the workers by the UWU and to keep them trapped within the framework of the union as it prepared a sell-out deal with management.

The consequence of this operation was that the UWU pushed through an enterprise agreement in February that provided Coles with everything it wanted, including a mandate for the closure of the facility and the destruction of all 350 jobs there.

On April 1, the UWU brought senior Labor leader Tanya Plibersek and ACTU President Michele O'Neil to address a gathering of McCormick workers.

McCormick, a major US-based firm that makes herbs and spices as well as the sauces used by fast-food chains, is seeking to impose sweeping attacks on the wages and conditions of the workers. It is trying to abolish a four-day work week and other longstanding arrangements, in a move that would cost some workers hundreds of dollars a week.

Plibersek, a Labor powerbroker who is currently the shadow minister for education and for women, proclaimed: "We'll stand with you on the production line, we'll stand with the people that are stacking the food on the shelf." Plibersek condemned a five-year wage freeze,

to which the McCormick workers have already been subjected, and declared that in "[Prime Minister] Scott Morrison's Australia, it's perfectly acceptable for everything to go up and for wages to flatline."

In reality, this is the program, not only of the Liberal-National Coalition, but also of Labor and their union allies.

Only one day before the McCormick rally, Plibersek participated in Labor's online "Special Platform Conference," where the party pledged to be an "effective and collaborative partner with the business community." Labor is pitching itself as a reliable instrument to impose the demands of the corporate elite for a sweeping overhaul of workplace relations and conditions aimed at boosting profits at the expense of workers.

This has been Labor's role for decades, especially since the 1980s when the Hawke-Keating governments oversaw the deregulation of the economy and the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs across manufacturing.

Plibersek herself was a leading figure in the federal Labor governments of 2007-2013. These introduced the Fair Work laws, which ban virtually all industrial action, presided over the destruction of most of what remained of the car industry and introduced major attacks on health, education and welfare. As health minister in 2012, Plibersek administered \$400 million in cuts to the sector, resulting in the closure of hundreds of hospital beds.

When ACTU President Michele O'Neil spoke, she took cynicism to new levels, telling the McCormick workers, "You are not alone, you've got the whole trade union movement with you." O'Neil used exactly the same phrase in a speech she delivered via video to the Smeaton Grange workers late last year.

O'Neil said nothing about what this support would consist of. In fact the ACTU, as at Smeaton Grange, is doing everything it can to isolate the McCormick dispute and prevent it from becoming the focal point of a broader

struggle.

Over the past year, the ACTU has taken the lead in suppressing any industrial or political action by workers. It has collaborated with the Liberal-National government throughout the pandemic, suspending penalty rates and set hours for broad sections of the working class.

ACTU Secretary Sally McManus told employers that they could “get everything they want” and worked hand in hand with then industrial relations minister Christian Porter, who described the union leader as his new “best friend forever” [BFF].

More broadly, all of the attacks imposed by employers during the past 12 months have been based on Labor’s draconian Fair Work legislation. It prohibits strikes outside set bargaining periods, bans secondary action, ensuring that stoppages remain isolated, and provides for continuous restructuring of wages and conditions.

But this modus operandi is coming under pressure. The workers at McCormick have been on indefinite strike since February 26, while the Coles Smeaton Grange staff held out for three months. This reflects a growing determination among workers to fight back against a corporate offensive that has been facilitated by the unions for decades.

Labor and the unions are intensely hostile to this emerging opposition. At Smeaton Grange, workers increasingly entered into conflict with the UWU, repeatedly voting down its sell-out agreements and denouncing the union bureaucrats for working with management against them.

To prevent this from happening at McCormick, a procession of Labor and union leaders have turned up to the picket to falsely assure the workers of their undying support. Their real aim is to keep the struggle restricted to a single workplace and to confine the workers within the parameters of the UWU.

On 4 March, Sally McManus, along with Victorian Labor senator Jess Walsh, went to the picket to speak about the “damaging impact of wage stagnation.” McManus could be considered an expert in the field having directly overseen the slashing of millions of clerical and hospitality workers’ wages, during 2020, as part of the ACTU’s collaboration with the Morrison government.

Labor leader Anthony Albanese addressed the McCormick workers less than a week later. On Twitter he declared that “Wages have gone nowhere in almost a decade. Work is getting less secure. Labor has a plan to fix this.” But this is bluster. Wages have stagnated under

every recent Labor government and rates of casualisation have soared.

Albanese attended a Coles Smeaton rally in December last year, where he denounced the actions of Coles as “quite frankly a disgrace.” His appearance occurred as the UWU was dropping its wage claim and adopting the company’s pay offer.

As at Smeaton Grange, despite the various professions of support, the UWU and its union allies have refused to establish a permanent strike fund, instead calling for public donations that will be irregularly doled out to the workers.

The strikers last week voted down a company enterprise agreement, with more than 90 percent dismissing McCormick’s offer. The experience at Smeaton Grange demonstrated, however, simply voting “no” is not enough.

The UWU, Labor and the unions are seeking to wear down the workers so that they are eventually compelled to accept a regressive enterprise agreement. The union officials responded to the “no” vote by immediately appealing to management for backroom talks and a new offer.

Not a single step forward can be taken within the framework of the union. A break with the UWU is required, along with the establishment of new organisations of struggle, including independent rank-and-file committees. These would break the isolation imposed by the union, and coordinate broader action by workers throughout the warehousing and logistics industry.

This is a political fight directed against the austerity agenda of the government, Labor, the unions, and the Fair Work legislation that they use to suppress any collective struggle. It requires a broader political movement of the working class, aimed at restructuring society on socialist lines, including placing the major corporations and the banks under public ownership and democratic workers’ control. That is the perspective fought for by the Socialist Equality Party.



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