

Australian McCormick Food workers' strike ended by United Workers Union

Patrick O'Connor
13 April 2021

Almost 100 manufacturing workers at a McCormick Foods plant in Melbourne ended their six-week strike on April 7 after the United Workers Union (UWU) brokered what appears to be an “in principle” agreement with company management.

The UWU has claimed a major “win” for the workers. It has reported that the deal includes: “Retaining ALL previous conditions the company wanted to remove including the four-day week roster; 9 percent pay rise across 3 years; \$5,000 sign on bonus.”

No other details have been made available. It remains unclear whether a full enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) has been drafted. If has, it has not been made public. McCormick workers who have spoken with the *World Socialist Web Site* indicated that they are not aware of the full details of the union-management agreement.

Workers should have no confidence in union assurances of a victory. The WSWS has learned of at least one concession on workplace conditions that was not included in the UWU’s statement on the end of the strike—the introduction of a new night shift. This company demand was part of its drive to slash overtime wage payments.

What other concessions have been agreed to but not made public? In industrial agreements, it is very frequently the case that the devil lies in the details.

Workers must demand full access to the entire agreement and time to study its contents, and organise a mass meeting to discuss how to carry forward the fight for decent wages and working conditions, including the option of resuming the strike.

Even if one were to take the UWU’s claims at face value, the purported agreement does not constitute a “victory.” The 3 percent annual wage rise is only marginally higher than the official annual cost of living

increases. This follows a five-year period where workers received no wage rise at all. As the WSWS previously noted, this amounted to “an effective wage cut of at least 10 percent based on cost-of-living increases over that period—the equivalent of working one day each fortnight for free.”

The \$5,000 sign on bonus was evidently offered by the company in place of full back pay for lost wages endured by workers over the six-week strike.

As for “retaining ALL conditions” (union emphasis), this amounts to a tacit acknowledgement that not a single improvement in workplace conditions was secured by the UWU bureaucracy.

This follows a torrent of hot air blown by multiple trade union bureaucrats and Labor Party politicians on the McCormick picket.

Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) secretary Sally McManus declared she was offering “100 percent solidarity.” In reality the workers were kept isolated and subordinated to the anti-democratic Fair Work industrial laws that the unions helped the former federal Labor government to draft.

The picket maintained for six weeks would be more accurately described as a pseudo-picket, with no effort made to block the coming and going of stockpiled supplies at the plant. No other section of workers was organised to take industrial action in support of the striking workers, including warehouse workers at a nearby distribution centre owned by McCormick.

Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese appeared before the striking workers, falsely posturing as their champion. Albanese’s real agenda has been made clear by his multiple public assurances to big business and finance capital that if he is made prime minister he will work to boost profits through a stepped up “productivity” and “growth” agenda.

Senior Labor figure Tanya Plibersek likewise made an appearance on April 1, going to the McCormick plant immediately after the conclusion of a Labor Party conference that, as the WSWS reported, “amounted to a rather anxious pitch to the corporate elite by the Labor leaders and their trade union partners presenting themselves as uniquely qualified to prosecute its agenda in the face of unprecedented geo-strategic and social tensions.”

The UWU’s promotion of the Labor Party contrasted with the bureaucracy’s aggressive and provocative interactions with *World Socialist Web Site* reporters during the McCormick strike.

Union officials were determined to make impossible a discussion with workers on the issues involved in the fight against McCormick management, including on the lessons of the Coles Smeaton Grange dispute. This involved 350 workers being locked out for more than three months at a Sydney warehouse, without receiving any strike pay from the UWU, only for the union to engineer a return to work on management terms while delivering every essential demand that had been issued by Coles (see “Australian union rams through sell-out at Coles Smeaton Grange”).

McCormick is a multi-national corporate giant, with a market capitalization of \$US24 billion, and boasts over \$5 billion in annual sales across 160 countries and territories. The company’s wage-cutting drive at the Melbourne plant is part of an international restructuring offensive against its global workforce.

In 2009, in the midst of the global financial crisis, McCormick unveiled a so-called Comprehensive Continuous Improvement (CCI) program. Between 2009 and 2015, this involved cost-cutting totalling \$US450 million and mass layoffs, including 8 percent of the company’s workforce in North America. The restructuring has only intensified in the last six years. In 2020 alone, \$100 million was slashed from the company’s budget, with an equivalent figure expected for 2021.

In other words, more management attacks are on the agenda, at the Melbourne plant and elsewhere. McCormick Foods workers in Melbourne have to take their struggle out of the hands of the UWU bureaucracy.

A rank-and-file committee ought to be established, with the immediate and urgent task of securing every

detail of the agreement struck between the union and company management, making this information accessible to the entire workforce, and organising a democratically run mass meeting to discuss the way forward.

We encourage McCormick Foods workers to contact the WSWS to discuss these important political issues.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact