

Vinidex pipe workers walk out over poor pay and conditions in Brisbane, Australia

Mike Head
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After years of low pay, super-exploitation and casualisation, workers at the Vinidex factory in the Brisbane suburb of Coopers Plains walked off for 48 hours last Thursday and Friday.

Workers on picket duty told the WSWs they would launch an indefinite strike unless the company, which makes plastic piping and gardening essentials, agreed to an enterprise agreement to increase their wages.

They said they had “had enough” after being paid for years an effective flat rate of only about \$20 an hour, despite doing highly technical and dangerous work involving plastics and chemicals. For doing 12-hour shifts, around the clock, every day of the week, they receive a 42 percent loading, taking their rates to around \$29.50 an hour.

Over the past 15 months, they have been seeking increases of up to \$10 an hour to bring them into line with Vinidex workers at Smithfield in Sydney and Sunshine in Melbourne. The company reneged on a deal struck last November for pay parity.

The corporate media has maintained a blackout on their walkout, out of concern that it could trigger similar stoppages throughout basic industry across the country as employers exploit the COVID-19 pandemic to axe permanent jobs and deepen cuts to wages and conditions.

Vinidex has kept the factory working throughout the pandemic, insisting it is an “essential industry,” while breaking pledges to increase pay and provide better conditions.

The workers’ delegate Rich Matelau told the WSWs: “We are getting shafted. For years the company has been getting away with winding us back. We held a mass meeting this morning and we will take indefinite industrial action if we have to.”

Matelau said the workers, many of them skilled

“extrusion technicians,” were being paid “slave rates” despite the company making huge profits. Many workers were also doing two jobs for the price of one, with the company taking away the job classification system.

Matelau said the workers were giving the company “one more chance” to meet their demands. “Workers don’t want to beg,” he said. Pay and conditions had deteriorated since he started work at the plant seven years ago. “We used to have decent wages, but now we dread coming to work.”

Vinidex was taken over in 2014 by Aliaxis, a \$3 billion Belgian-based international private company. For several years, it has given the manufacturing and distribution workers pay rises of just a few cents a year, and replaced about a third of the 70-strong workforce with labour hire casuals.

According to its 2020 annual report, Aliaxis recovered quickly last year after an initial COVID-19 downturn. It had revenues of 2.9 billion euros (\$A4.6 billion), and made 461 million euros (\$A726 million) in profit, generating a 16 percent rate of return on capital for its owners. Aliaxis boasted of more than 14,000 employees in 40 countries, having reduced its global workforce by almost 2,000 during the past two years.

In a ballot supervised by the Fair Work Commission (FWC) industrial tribunal in April, the Brisbane Vinidex workers showed their determination to fight the corporate offensive. They voted by a strong majority for “an unlimited number of stoppages of work of indefinite duration.”

The United Workers Union (UWU) took over coverage of the Brisbane plant in 2018 after the Australian Workers Union had earlier abandoned the site. Despite the company reneging on an agreement last November, the UWU has so far called just this

48-hour stoppage.

In a media release, the UWU said it was seeking “pay parity” with other Vinidex sites in Sydney and Melbourne, “where workers are paid up to \$10 more an hour for doing the same job.”

However, the UWU has called no support action at these plants, or at other workplaces covered by the union, even though it claims more than 150,000 members across Australia.

The UWU signed a three-year enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) with Vinidex in 2019 covering the company’s Sunshine plant in Melbourne. The deal set flat rates for new extruder operators as low as \$928 a week, with a similar 42 percent loading for overtime, shift and weekend work, and annual rises of just 2.6 percent a year, barely covering the soaring cost of living for working class households.

That EBA also placed no limit on the company’s use of contract labour. Casuals could apply for permanency after six months of “regular and systemic work,” but without any guarantee of being hired.

The EBA stipulates that disputes over the rights of casuals, or any other issue, must be referred to the FWC. That is in line with the Fair Work Act’s ban on all industrial action outside union-supervised “enterprise bargaining periods” between each EBA.

This anti-strike straitjacket was initiated by the union movement when the enterprise bargaining system was jointly introduced by the Keating Labor government and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) in 1992 as part of the Labor-ACTU prices and incomes Accords of the 1980s and 1990s. It was reinforced and re-branded as “Fair Work Australia” by the unions and the Rudd-Gillard Labor governments of 2007 to 2013.

The UWU, formed in 2019 as a “super-union” merger between the National Union of Workers and United Voice, has adopted the posture of a “militant” union since then in order to contain an eruption of discontent among low-paid workers like those at Vinidex.

Most recently, the UWU imposed sellout EBAs on Coles warehouse workers at Smeaton Grange in Sydney after a 14-week lockout and the McCormick food workers in Melbourne after a six-week strike.

Despite holding assets worth \$300.8 million, including cash reserves of \$94.2 million, the UWU refused to provide strike pay for the locked-out Coles

workers, eventually coercing them into an EBA that allows for the closure of the warehouse as part of the pandemic-accelerated restructuring of the logistics industry.

To take forward their fight, the Vinidex workers in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne need to form rank-and-file committees, independent of the UWU, to unify their struggles and link up with other workers facing the corporate offensive, including Aliaxis workers globally.



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