

Union attacks socialists as it isolates strike at Australian General Mills plant

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On Friday morning, around 80 permanent staff at the General Mills factory in Sydney began an indefinite strike to demand improved wages and conditions in a forthcoming Enterprise Agreement (EA).

The stoppage reflects a growing determination among workers to fight back against a corporate offensive on jobs, conditions and pay. The United Workers Union (UWU), however, is seeking to divide the workers and isolate the strike.

UWU bureaucrats have physically seized leaflets and blocked Socialist Equality Party campaigners and *World Socialist Web Site* reporters from speaking to workers. This is part of a concerted attempt by the union to bar workers from discussing the political issues they confront, and to suppress a socialist alternative to the UWU's collaboration with management.

The factory in Sydney's Rooty Hill is the only one in Australia owned by General Mills and makes food products for brands such as Old El Paso and Latina Fresh pasta.

According to the UWU, the company is offering wage rises of 2 percent in the first year of the new agreement and 1.25 percent each following year. Given mounting inflation, this amounts to a real wage cut.

The union has also stated that management is demanding "increase[d] obligations for weekend work, [and] no new permanent jobs." Workers have rejected the company's offer on multiple occasions, including in one ballot where 91 percent of eligible staff registered their opposition.

The UWU has released a handful of statements, appealing to company management for a "fair and respectful wage increase," and bemoaning the high rates of casualisation at the factory. But it has not publicly issued a single concrete demand on pay or any other question and has outlined the issues in the dispute only in the vaguest of terms.

This serves two interrelated purposes. Firstly, it gives the union's officials a free hand in their negotiations with management, providing scope for a sell-out deal that does not address any of the workers' demands. Secondly, it is aimed at preventing a mobilisation of the working class in

support of the strike, by covering up what the workers are fighting for.

This is part of a broader attempt to weaken the strike, including through the incitement of hostility to casual staff, who make up half of the workforce.

Under anti-strike provisions in Fair Work legislation, introduced by the last federal Labor government, with the full support of the unions, it is illegal for the casuals employed by labour hire companies to take part in the stoppage, because they are not a party to the enterprise agreement in dispute.

The UWU fully backs this draconian industrial framework, and enforces its ban on casuals participating in strikes, as well as secondary industrial action at other facilities. Every previous union-signed agreement at General Mills, moreover, dating back to at least 2004, has permitted the company to use an unlimited number of labour hire contractors.

In other words, the union has orchestrated a situation in which half of the company's workers are on strike, and the other half, the casual staff, are staying on the job.

To conceal its own responsibility and to pit workers against one another, the UWU has launched a foul campaign against the casuals. It has denounced them as scabs, with one UWU official instructing permanent workers at the beginning of the strike to make the casuals "look you in the eye and make them understand that they are f**king you."

To further the isolation, the UWU has not even made a pretense of encouraging support for the strike elsewhere in the food production industry, where a host of companies are imposing restructures amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The union has not so much as mentioned the fact that the dispute in Sydney takes place as General Mills carries out a sweeping cost-cutting operation globally. The company has forecast that this will cost \$US170 million to \$US220 million, mostly in severance pay, as it destroys hundreds or thousands of jobs in the US and elsewhere.

Bitterly hostile to the fight to mobilise workers in Australia, much less internationally, the UWU is hanging the

Sydney General Mills workers out to dry on an isolated “community protest” at the factory gate. Workers have told the WSWs that there has been no talk of strike pay from the union.

Such community protests are the antithesis of genuine pickets. Nothing is done to stop production or to rally support. Instead, the workers are worn down, while the union officials keep an eye on potential troublemakers and move to silence them.

The UWU has already initiated a campaign of intimidation. Within minutes of the strike beginning on Friday morning, a UWU official told SEP campaigners to “go away,” or “I’ll get the members to push you off.” On Saturday, UWU officials and a delegate forced SEP members to leave the site at a publicly advertised “community protest” being conducted on a public road.

The attacks escalated yesterday. When SEP campaigners approached another such “community protest,” they were accosted by two UWU officials, who blocked their path.

The UWU bureaucrats declared they would illegally prevent the SEP campaigners from continuing to walk down the public street. One of them, Alex Suhle, a full-time UWU organiser, aggressively snatched leaflets from the hand of a WSWs reporter.

When the SEP team insisted on its democratic right to campaign and speak with workers, the other UWU official, who refused to identify himself, declared: “You don’t have any democratic rights here.”

Two days earlier, Suhle and his fellow bureaucrats fawned over Ed Husic, the federal Labor Party member of parliament for the area and invited him to address the workers. Labor has over the past four decades presided over the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs, an unending assault on conditions and the imposition of some of the most punitive industrial laws of an advanced economy.

The UWU’s attacks on the SEP are aimed at creating a climate of intimidation, directed above all against the workers themselves.

Suhle and his colleagues have extensive experience in such operations. Earlier this year he played a central role in the UWU’s sellout of 350 Coles warehouse workers at the company’s Smeaton Grange warehouse in western Sydney.

The union isolated the workers over the course of a 14-week company lockout, and refused to provide them with strike pay, despite declaring more than \$300 million in assets last year, including over \$94 million in cash and equivalents.

UWU officials and their lackeys among a handful of delegates sought to prevent SEP campaigners from speaking to workers at the Smeaton Grange picket. The purpose of

this became ever clearer, as the dispute evolved into an open confrontation between the union and the majority of workers, who repeatedly voted down sell-out agreements pushed by the UWU.

Revealing the real line up, Coles Chief Operations Officer Matt Swindells released a video in February, praising the UWU’s collaboration with management, denouncing workers and warning against the “extremist anti-union socialists” of the SEP. A month later, as workers were on the brink of destitution, the UWU forced through an enterprise agreement providing for the destruction of all, or most, of the 350 jobs and the Smeaton Grange distribution centre.

The unions’ thuggery must be rejected and openly denounced by all who uphold democratic rights, above all, the right of workers to openly and freely discuss the political issues they confront.

But more than that, workers at General Mills and elsewhere must draw conclusions from these experiences and the countless betrayals of the unions.

The UWU and its affiliates are company unions. They work with management against their own members, have the closest of ties to the big business Labor Party, denounce exploited casuals and attack socialists fighting for a genuine struggle in defence of workers’ rights and conditions.

Not a single step forward can be taken within the straitjacket of these corporatised unions and their gangster officials. New organisations of struggle, including independent-rank-and-file committees are required, to defeat the isolation imposed by the unions, and to coordinate a broader mobilisation of workers, throughout the food production and warehousing sectors.

Workers are in a political struggle, directed not only against management, but the unions, Labor, the corporate media, big business and the Fair Work industrial legislation they all support. This line-up can be fought only through the development of a political movement of the working class as a whole, directed against the austerity agenda of the capitalist class and all of its defenders.



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