

Oppose the United Workers Union's threats and intimidation against the Socialist Equality Party (Australia)!

Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
8 June 2021

Over the past four days, full-time officials from the United Workers Union (UWU) have conducted a coordinated campaign of threats, intimidation and physical obstruction, aimed at preventing members of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) from campaigning among 80 workers at the General Mills plant in western Sydney who began indefinite strike action on Friday.

The UWU's attacks on the SEP are part of a broader attempt by the trade union to isolate and weaken the strike.

Workers have demonstrated their determination to fight the global food manufacturing company's bid to impose an enterprise agreement that limits wage increases to well-below the rate of inflation, cuts overtime payments and allows for the unfettered use of low-paid casual staff.

But the union is seeking to wear them down, to prepare the grounds for a sell-out deal with management.

The UWU has made no attempt to halt production at the factory. It is being operated by casuals, who make up half the workforce after more than 15-years of union-brokered deals providing for the unlimited use of labour hire staff. The UWU is seeking to divide workers, denouncing the casuals as "scabs," even though the union upholds draconian Fair Work industrial legislation, which bans them from participating in stoppages.

And the UWU has not even made a pretence of mobilising broader layers of the working class, including in the food production industry, to support the strike. It has only established an ineffectual community protest outside the factory gate, where workers will be hung out to dry. Workers told the WSWs on the weekend that the union has not even mentioned strike pay.

It is under these conditions that the UWU is seeking to prevent SEP members and supporters from even approaching the workers. The UWU's campaign of intimidation is a flagrant violation of the SEP's democratic rights and an attack on socialism by a trade union that has the closest of ties to the big-business Labor Party and collaborates on a daily basis with some of the country's largest corporations.

But it is also a major assault on the rights of the workers themselves. The union is trying to stop workers from hearing, discussing and reading a socialist alternative to its collaboration with management and isolation of the stoppage. The UWU is sending a message to workers that if they speak out and oppose its sordid manoeuvres, or even raise critical questions, they too will be subjected to attack.

The union's attempts to obstruct the SEP began just minutes after workers walked off the job on Friday morning. Shortly thereafter, 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.

On Sunday, 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. Suhle and the other official, who refused to identify himself, repeatedly responded to objections from the SEP campaigners, by declaring: "You don't have democratic rights here." Suhle and his colleague stated that they would do the same each time the SEP approaches workers in the future.

Last night, Suhle posted the WSWs article reporting on the incident to his Facebook page. Sharon Eurlings, another UWU organiser, commented: "Lucky I wasn't there! The things I want to do to those fu*kers!!!" Suhle responded: "I'll hold em you practice your round house kicks." Eurlings replied: "I will when I'm feeling better! followed by the uppercuts!!! More satisfying."

The statements are clear threats of physical violence. They brand the UWU officials as backward thugs, who are only capable of responding to socialist exposure with the blunt instruments of intimidation.

Another comment of Suhle's made clear that these are not idle threats. Replying to a supporter of the union bureaucracy, Suhle stated: "I am just applying the MUA [Maritime Union of Australia] model to dealing with the SEP. it's very effective comrade." The comment, as well as several others on the thread, was a reference to the 2015 dispute at Hutchison Ports in Sydney.

In August of that year, the Hutchison workers went on strike after the transnational corporation fired 97 of them by text message. Federal government ministers and industry chiefs denounced the stoppage because of its impact on a key sector of the economy and their fears that it could become the focal point of a broader movement.

For a week, the MUA isolated the strikers and engaged in backroom negotiations with management. Each day of the strike, SEP campaigners visited the site and spoke to workers, without incident.

On August 14, the MUA declared there had been a "breakthrough" in its negotiations with management. On the same day, MUA Sydney branch secretary Paul McAleer was joined outside the facility by around 20 officials and thugs of the Construction, Forestry, Mining

and Energy Union (CFMEU). They surrounded three SEP campaigners, whom they jostled, snatched a notebook from, and threatened to murder. Over the following days, MUA and CFMEU officials repeatedly threatened SEP members, declaring they would shoot them and throw them in the port.

Days after the first attack, the MUA proclaimed a “victory,” declared that the strike was over and forced the workers back on the job. Three months later, the union revealed that its agreement with management provided for the destruction of at least 65 jobs, an extension of working hours, cuts to overtime payments and an expansion of the use of casuals. In other words, the attack on the SEP, which was alone in warning that the union was preparing a betrayal, was a crucial preparation in selling out the strike and imposing company demands.

The same basic dynamic was revealed in the dispute earlier this year at Coles’ Smeaton Grange warehouse in southwestern Sydney, which was also referenced repeatedly beneath Suhle’s Facebook post.

Beginning in November 2020, the UWU isolated the 350 workers over the course of a 14-week company lockout. Time and again, the union rejected demands from the workers for strike pay, under conditions in which they were depleting their savings and superannuation and being left on the brink of destitution.

While they were contemptuous of the workers, the UWU officials engaged in backroom discussions with management throughout the dispute. On more than ten occasions, the workers were compelled to vote on a rotten sell-out agreement, including in ballots organised by the union.

The SEP was again alone in opposing the isolation of the workers, rallying support for their struggle and exposing the machinations of the UWU. It was only as a result of SEP campaigns that many workers at other Coles warehouses even became aware of the lockout. Statements and articles on the WSWS were shared widely and contributed to the workers’ repeated rejection of the sellout. As the dispute progressed, it evolved into an incipient rebellion by the workers against the UWU, which many correctly stated was “in bed with management.”

The UWU officials, including Eurlings and Suhle, responded by seeking to block SEP campaigners from the site, in collaboration with a handful of delegates.

In February, after workers had voted “no” in a ballot promoted by the UWU and management, Coles Chief Operations Officer Matt Swindells posted a video revealing the real line-up in the dispute.

Swindells denounced the workers and declared they would be locked out until they accepted the union sellout. He praised the UWU for its collaboration. The manager warned against the “anti-union extremist socialists” of the SEP and their “wider agenda” of expanding the struggle and “taking on big business and the banks.”

Only in March, when they were faced with an indefinite continuation of the lockout, were the Smeaton Grange workers compelled to accept the UWU’s rotten deal. It provided for the destruction of all, or most of the 350 jobs, and the closure of the facility, setting a blueprint for four other Coles warehouses that the company is also planning to shutter.

This record is a blunt warning to General Mills workers. The attacks on the SEP are an attack on you. They are part of a union operation to isolate your strike and to prepare the conditions for a sellout. That is why all workers, permanent and casual, must oppose the UWU’s attempts to bar the SEP and insist on the right of all supporters of the strike to free and unfettered discussion.

Broader sections of the working class must also oppose the UWU’s anti-socialist campaign. The SEP appeals to workers to send statements opposing the union’s threats and upholding the democratic rights of the SEP and workers. This is a crucial component of breaking the isolation of the General Mills strike, mobilising support for it, and defeating the attempts of the union to create a precedent that will be used against socialists and other opponents of the bureaucracy in future disputes.

Above all, definite political conclusions must be drawn from the UWU’s thuggery. This is not a workers’ organisation. It is a company union that functions as a police force of management and advances the interests of a privileged bureaucracy that is hostile to the working class. The UWU has assets of more than \$300 million, including cash reserves of over \$94 million. It will not open this war chest to provide strike pay. The money is for the union’s wealthy executives, its full-time staff, its campaigns to isolate workers’ struggles and to promote the Labor Party.

The role of the UWU is replicated by all its counterparts. For more than 40 years, the unions have functioned as the essential mechanism for suppressing any struggle by workers.

The unions collaborated with the Hawke and Keating Labor governments, beginning in the 1980s, to destroy hundreds of thousands of jobs, deregulate the economy and eliminate entire sectors of the workforce. Since then, they have signed innumerable enterprise agreements, which have resulted in massive rates of casualisation, stagnant and declining wages and ever-worsening conditions. The unions have not only enforced, but also collaborated in the drafting of anti-strike legislation, including the Fair Work Act, which bans almost all collective action.

Not a step forward can be achieved by workers under the grip of these unions. The SEP urges workers to build new organisations of struggle, including independent rank-and-file committees. These must defeat the isolation imposed by the unions, mobilise the widest layers of the working class in support of struggles that erupt, including the General Mills strike, and coordinate a unified industrial and political fightback against the union-enforced corporate offensive.

This is a political fight, directed not only against company managements, but the corporate media, the unions, Labor and the entire industrial framework that has been used to stymie any struggle. It requires the development of a political movement of the working class, against the austerity agenda supported by the capitalist ruling class and all of its defenders.

It is precisely because this perspective, a socialist perspective, resonates with the experiences of workers, that the UWU and other unions are so fearful of any discussion of it.



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