

Seven days of the General Mills strike in Sydney: Workers must break union-imposed isolation

Oscar Grenfell
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Around 80 workers who walked-out of the General Mills (GM) factory in western Sydney last Friday remain on strike, signalling their determination to fight back against the company's attacks on their pay and conditions.

The GM strikers have joined a growing wave of resistance by the international working class. Their strike coincides with a stoppage by 3,000 Volvo workers in the US, who have rejected a union sell-out contract; as well as dozens of other strikes and protests taking place around the world.

As is the case in all of these disputes, the GM workers confront two related obstacles. Firstly, the intransigence of the company, which is determined to slash costs to drive up the profits of its billionaire investors, and secondly, the isolation of their struggle by the union.

GM is a major transnational corporation that is controlled by the largest Wall Street investment firms. The company is carrying out a sweeping international restructure, aimed at destroying 700–800 jobs in North America, and 500–600 internationally over the next three years, on top of 5,660 sackings and 21 plant closures since 2005. GM's drive to enforce below-inflation wage rises and an expansion of casualisation at the Sydney factory are part of this globally-coordinated offensive.

It can only be defeated by mobilising the industrial and political strength of the working class, not just at one factory, but across GM's international operations, throughout the food production industry and more broadly.

But this is precisely what the United Workers Union (UWU) is trying to prevent. If there was any doubt about it, the past week has demonstrated that the UWU has no perspective for workers to expand their struggle, win support from the working class as a whole and put the company on the back foot. The union is doing the opposite.

The GM strikers are fighting against problems that confront the entire working class: stagnant and declining pay, ever-greater rates of casualisation and a cost-cutting offensive by the major companies. To the extent that the issues in the strike are explained, thousands of workers will identify with this struggle.

Currently, however, most workers in western Sydney, let alone more broadly, do not know that the strike is taking place. The UWU has done the bare minimum to publicise it, even among its own members. The union's attempt to keep the strike quiet has

been aided by the corporate newspapers, which have not published a single article on the stoppage, and the middle class pseudo-left organisations, such as Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance, who have not mentioned it in their publications.

For the first week of the strike, the UWU did not issue a single concrete demand that could rally support from the working class. Only today did it declare that it was requesting a miserly three percent per annum pay rise, barely-above the rapidly rising rate of inflation. This is just one percent higher than what the company has already offered for the first year, and 1.75 percent greater over the following years. The union has also vaguely called for greater "job security," under conditions in which half of all workers are casual.

In fact, the UWU is attacking the casual workers, whose large number is the direct product of previous union-company agreements. It has denounced the labour hire staff as "f*cking us over" for continuing to work, even though the union supports the Fair Work laws that ban them from participating, and has not appealed to them to join this struggle.

As has happened so many times before, the union has set up a continuous "community protest" outside the factory gate, which is not stopping production or fulfilling any of the functions of a picket. In countless previous disputes, such "protests" have served to demoralise strikers and allow the union officials to keep an eye on workers who are becoming critical of the UWU.

This is invariably linked to a denial of strike pay, to starve the workers out. Last weekend, workers said strike pay had not even been mentioned by the union. Today, the UWU began a crowdfunding, indicating that it does not intend to open its substantial coffers. Its target is just \$15,000. If distributed among the 80 workers, this would amount to only \$175 each.

A warning must be raised bluntly: if the strike is confined to these limits, and the UWU has its way, workers will be defeated, and the union will force through a rotten enterprise agreement that gives the company what it wants.

Anyone in doubt should study the experience of the 350 workers at Coles' Smeaton Grange warehouse in southwestern Sydney.

For 14 weeks, the UWU isolated them during a company lockout, refused to give them any strike pay as they lost tens of thousands in wages, and forced them to vote on the same sell-out deal more than ten times. When the workers' resistance was

finally broken, the union pushed through an enterprise agreement in March for the closure of the warehouse, the destruction of all or most of the jobs, and the pitiful pay and redundancy levels demanded by Coles from the start.

The only difference is that the UWU is working to a much faster sell-out timetable in the GM dispute.

This is why one of the only concrete activities of the union officials over the past week has been to block Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaigners from speaking to workers. The UWU has reportedly done the same to members of the pseudo-left Solidarity group, though it supports the union bureaucracy and has promoted previous sellouts. Even Solidarity's mealy-mouthed and tepid criticisms, however, cannot be permitted.

To justify this censorship, the union officials have called several "votes" at the picket line, asking whether workers want SEP and Solidarity members to leave. No one has been allowed to speak in opposition or even to vote against the "motion." The UWU's balloting resembles that of a one-party dictatorship, where there is only one choice.

In fact, the UWU is trying to establish a political stranglehold at the protest. Those who support the union bureaucracy, its isolation of the strike and its plans for a sell-out are allowed but those who expose this operation and oppose it are not. That is why parliamentarians from the Labor Party, who represent big business and have cut thousands of jobs, are welcomed with open arms. As are representatives of the Communist Party of Australia, which continues to support the Soviet Stalinist regime's mass murder of socialists in the 1930s and all its monstrous crimes against the working class. But SEP campaigners are treated to threats of violence.

Workers must oppose these attacks on democratic rights. Demand the right of all supporters of the strike to freely discuss the issues you confront and the way forward! Insist on your own right to hear alternative perspectives that the union wants to silence!

Otherwise, the UWU will succeed in identifying its own tuggery and violence with your legitimate struggle, discrediting it in the eyes of the working class. And it will establish a precedent, where workers who raise opposition to the union leaders, or even ask critical questions, can be attacked.

Such a stand must be linked to a fight to broaden the strike immediately. The union has shown that it will only advance demands for marginal pay increases, and for vague "job security" pledges that do not address the issue of rampant casualisation. Against the union's "demands," which will be used as a pretext for ending the strike and pushing through a sell-out, workers should develop their own demands that advance their interests.

The first demand workers must raise should be of the UWU itself. Tell the officials to use their \$300 million in assets and \$94 million in cash holdings to provide full strike pay, no less than lost wages. If the union cries poor, as it did at Smeaton Grange, ask how many hundreds of thousands of dollars a year its national leaders and officials are paid.

Workers must reach out to the casual staff, and appeal for them to join the stoppage, with full strike pay from the union. The only way to guarantee the rights and conditions of all workers is to

demand full permanency for every staff member, including the casual employees.

This requires a complete rejection of the Fair Work industrial regime, imposed by the Rudd Labor government and the unions in 2009, which is used to ban virtually all collective action and to prevent strikes from being broadened.

Workers should also develop their own concrete wage demands, for annual pay increases many times greater than the current rate of inflation, without a single trade off on overtime or any other condition. Any claim that GM cannot afford this is a lie. In the year to February 28, the company reported operating profits of more than \$3.4 billion. Last year, CEO Jeff Harmening walked away with over \$15 million, while the next five most highly-paid executives received a total of \$24,364,735.

The UWU has demonstrated that it will not fight for any demands that threaten the company's bottom line, or its own. That is why workers need their own organisation, an independent rank-and-file committee, in which they can discuss and formulate what they are fighting for, organise concrete actions, reach out to GM workers internationally for a unified struggle, appeal to food production workers across Australia, and to the working class as a whole.

In this fight, the Socialist Equality Party unapologetically advances a socialist perspective. Workers at GM and everywhere else are up against a capitalist system that subordinates everything, including the jobs, wages and conditions, and even the very lives of workers, to the profit dictates of a billionaire oligarchy. This austerity agenda, and the massive social inequality that accompanies it, are supported, openly or tacitly, by every organisation that defends capitalism, from Labor and the Liberal-Nationals, to the corporate media and the unions.

The alternative is a fight for socialism, the democratic control of society's resources by the working class itself. The guiding perspective of all struggles that emerge, including the GM strike, must be to place the major corporations and the banks under public ownership and democratic workers' control. That is ultimately the only means of ending the attacks against jobs, conditions, wages and social rights that has been carried out for the past forty years.



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