

Australian union attacks socialists, promotes Labor at General Mills strike

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As the strike of 80 food manufacturing workers at the General Mills factory in western Sydney passed the seven-day mark, the United Workers Union (UWU) held a “family day” on Saturday.

The event was a graphic expression of the UWU’s role in isolating the stoppage, suppressing discussion among the workers and promoting the very political forces responsible for the decades-long destruction of full-time jobs, pro-business restructuring and suppression of wages, all of which are central issues in the dispute.

Despite claiming a national membership of over 150,000, the UWU mobilised fewer than 50 people. Given that a substantial number of them were union officials and their supporters, half or more of the striking workers boycotted the event. There was no participation from the thousands of food production and distribution workers at other facilities across Sydney, many of whom face a similar assault on their pay and conditions, or from the hundreds of thousands of working class people in the Rooty Hill area, where the factory is located.

Far from rallying support, the union is placing a *cordon sanitaire* around the strikers, depriving even its own members of any knowledge about the ongoing dispute.

A central component of this isolation operation has been repeated attacks on Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaigners, who are fighting to broaden the strike and are exposing the union’s preparations for a sell-out.

On Saturday, UWU officials again mounted a frenzied campaign to prevent SEP members from speaking with the workers in attendance, including through threats and intimidation.

At one point, a group of UWU officials formed a line and began screaming at SEP campaigners, demanding that they leave the event, which had been publicly-advertised as “all welcome,” and was conducted on a public street. Many of the workers present did not participate.

As they have on previous days, UWU organisers called for a vote to exclude the SEP from the “community protest.” When an SEP leader demanded the right to speak to the

motion, he was shouted down by the union officials. Sensing that their blatant thuggery is wearing thin, the officials did not proceed with a vote, instead continuing their harassment.

The UWU’s hysterics are motivated by the fact that they cannot answer a single one of the SEP’s exposures. Like in previous disputes, the UWU is isolating the strikers on an ineffectual “community protest” that is a mockery of a genuine picket, raising a “crowdfund” so as not to provide full strike pay out of the union’s coffers, and advancing “demands” of the company that would amount to a sell-out.

While the UWU officials refused to allow SEP campaigners to remain, two federal Labor parliamentarians Tony Burke and Ed Husic were welcomed with open arms. The attacks on the SEP were aimed at ensuring there would be nobody present to raise awkward questions of the two career politicians.

Speaking from a platform that had been prepared by attacks on the rights of socialists and the workers themselves, Burke and Husic delivered a series of timeless moral platitudes that did not commit them to anything.

Burke bemoaned the “thoughtless aggression” of the company, Husic treated the workers to homilies on the importance of sharing, which, as children are taught, “is the right thing” to do. Company management should be prevailed upon to treat the workers with “dignity” and “respect,” both of them insisted.

Burke and Husic have lengthy experience in saying nothing of substance in a great many words, in their capacity as representatives of the big business Labor Party, and their earlier careers as union bureaucrats, where they presided over the same sweeping cuts to workers’ jobs and conditions that the UWU is preparing for the GM strikers.

Both are part of Labor’s “right” faction. During the 1990s, Burke was an official in the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association (SDA), which is notorious for its extreme right-wing Catholic politics and its sweetheart deals with major corporations, which have slashed penalty rates and wages for tens of thousands of supermarket, retail and fast food workers. Husic was a staff-member of the

Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU) for over a decade, rising to the position of its national president.

In that role, Husic presided over a sell-out of tens of thousands of Australia Post workers who had engaged in rolling strikes in 2010, before the union forced through an agreement banning further industrial action, mandating minimal pay rises and providing for continuous restructuring directed towards privatisation. He was also heavily involved in the destruction of thousands of jobs at telecommunications company Telstra.

Husic and Burke were both in the Rudd-Gillard Labor governments, which in 2009 introduced draconian Fair Work Australia industrial legislation, banning virtually all collective action by workers and allowing for sweeping victimisations of those who defy its edicts.

Burke, as Labor's shadow industrial relations minister, is centrally involved in the party's current pitch to big business. This has involved dispensing with even mealy-mouthed references to inequality and the "big end of town," and replacing them with assurances that a Labor government would focus on "productivity" and "wealth creation," while advancing the interests of "successful people." All of these are codewords for austerity, pro-business restructuring and policies advancing the interests of the ultra-wealthy.

Workers must draw definite conclusions from the UWU's promotion of Husic and Burke.

First of all, the presence of the Labor politicians, who have intimate ties with the major corporations, such as General Mills, demonstrates that the UWU is seeking to deepen its collaboration with company management.

Secondly, the event is a warning that a sell-out is in the offing. At every significant dispute over the past six months, including the Coles' Smeaton Grange struggle in Sydney and the strike of McCormick food production workers in Melbourne, the appearance of Labor parliamentarians at such "community protests" had the character of a death-knell. In each instance, events similar to Saturday's were followed by the announcement of sweeping concessions by the UWU.

Significantly, the Labor politicians visited GM the day after the union unveiled its "demands," a week after the strike had begun. These include a three percent per annum pay rise, just one percent higher than the company offer in the first year, and 1.75 percent for the following years, and a vague commitment to enhanced "job security," which would do nothing to address the already rampant use of casual labour. The paltry demands are tailored to give management and the union free rein to concoct a sell-out deal that can be presented as a "victory."

Finally, the involvement of Burke in particular shows that

the GM strike, despite the small number of workers directly involved, is being monitored by the highest levels of the political establishment. The UWU's isolation of the stoppage and its attacks on socialists are undoubtedly being conducted in discussion with the rest of the national union bureaucracy and the Labor Party leadership.

This reflects intense fear within the union and Labor apparatuses, and the ruling elite they represent, of what the GM strike could and must become. That is, a rallying point for the mass opposition that exists in the working class to the decades-long corporate assault on jobs, wages and conditions and the immense social inequality that it has produced.

For the corporate elite, everything depends on the unions maintaining their stranglehold over the workers they falsely claim to represent. For the working class, everything depends on breaking out of this union-enforced straitjacket, which has been used to suppress the class struggle for the past forty years, and to impose one defeat after another.

Amid a growing rebellion against the corporatised unions internationally, reflected most sharply in the rejection by 3,000 US Volvo employees of two sell-out contracts pushed by the United Auto Workers union, the GM strikers must take matters into their own hands.

A defeat can only be prevented by immediately expanding the strike. This requires an appeal to casual workers at the factory, who have been demonised by the UWU, even though it upholds the Fair Work ban on them participating in strikes. Workers should demand that the union provide the casuals with full-strike pay, along with all other strikers, to bring production at the factory to a halt.

Workers must also turn out to food production staff throughout Sydney and across the country, to GM employees internationally, who are being hit with a global restructure, and to the working class as a whole.

The union is seeking to block such a struggle. That is why workers need to form their own independent rank-and-file committee, to break the isolation of the strike, and coordinate far broader industrial and political action. This is a political fight, directed not only against company management, but the unions, Labor, Fair Work, and the program of the entire capitalist ruling elite, which is seeking to return the conditions of the working class to those that existed in the 1930s.



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