

Australian union chief at General Mills strike: Platitudes, evasions, no perspective for workers

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While refusing to mobilise workers or even its own members in support of 80 striking General Mills staff, the United Workers Union (UWU) has brought a conga line of Labor Party politicians and senior union bureaucrats to the western Sydney factory.

Since the strike began two weeks ago, the UWU has held a series of “community protests,” “family days” and other “solidarity” events. None of them have been attended by more than a few dozen people.

Far from strengthening the strikers, the deliberate aim of such events is to sow demoralisation and to maintain the stranglehold of a union officialdom that has no intention of broadening the stoppage.

Production continues unabated inside the factory, which is being staffed by casual workers. In a godsend to management, the UWU has repeatedly denounced the casuals, ensuring that they do not join the stoppage and that there is no major disruption to company operations. Meanwhile, strikers are hung-out to dry on a permanent “community protest” outside the factory gates, without full strike pay from the UWU.

Labor and union officials are brought to the protest, and the strikers are told that they are important leaders who represent thousands of workers. The bureaucrats dust off a few old slogans, “solidarity forever”, “union power” and “workers united will never be defeated” before departing, while the strikers are left at the end of an isolated cul-de-sac in a dispute that most workers don’t even know about.

One of the challenges the UWU has faced is that the Labor and union leaders it has promoted are all right-wing hacks. Anyone familiar with their record knows they have never led a genuine struggle of workers but have only imposed sell-outs and defeats. The UWU’s “solution” to this problem has been to ensure that as little as possible is said at the events, and that socialists, workers and anyone else who might raise awkward questions are excluded.

Both methods were on display in a meeting at the community protest on Wednesday.

Socialist Equality Party members were once again blocked from speaking to workers by UWU officials, as they have been

repeatedly over the past fortnight.

And the meeting itself, billed as a “Wage Crisis Forum,” was organised to ensure no free discussion took place. It was a “forum” in which the speakers did not deliver opening remarks, there was no participation from workers and questions from the online audience were ignored or deleted. A handpicked delegate was permitted to speak for fewer than two minutes, and the only questions posed to the speakers were from senior UWU officials.

Sally McManus, the featured speaker, is secretary of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), the national union umbrella organisation. In that position, she nominally represents the 1.5 million members claimed by unions across the country. But Wednesday’s meeting demonstrated that McManus is not even able to speak directly to an audience of workers that numbered fewer than 40, with around 50 people watching live on a Facebook livestream.

McManus participated remotely via Zoom. The UWU officials and the one delegate who spoke were sequestered in a small tent, while a couple of dozen workers watched on a screen outside it, ensuring a buffer between them and the ACTU leader. The other speakers were UWU president Jo Schofield, John Falzon, a former charity CEO and senior fellow at Per Capita, and David Richardson of the Australia Institute. Both Per Capita and the Australia Institute are think tanks with close ties to Labor and the unions.

In response to questions from UWU officials, McManus and the other speakers pointed to the deepening social crisis confronting the working class. Wage growth, having stagnated for years, was at record lows. Casual and precarious employment accounted for a greater percentage of the workforce than ever before. Housing prices and living expenses had skyrocketed, while the major companies were seeking to further slash workers’ pay and conditions.

All true. But what was to account for this state of affairs? Richardson at one point referred to the “neo-liberal” policies of “successive governments” going back decades. McManus, a senior member of the Labor Party, which led many of those successive governments, looked nervous. Richardson, however,

did not elaborate.

The problem, the speakers insisted, were “greedy companies” and the current federal Liberal-National government. On the latter issue, none of them addressed the point Richardson had hinted at, namely that the current government is only continuing the pro-business policies of its predecessors, including Labor administrations.

The unions are once again seeking to channel workers’ anger behind the election of a Labor government, even as its main pitch is that it would serve the interests of big business and “successful people” in society better than the Liberal-Nationals.

Completely absent from the discussion was any reference to the record of the unions themselves.

All the social ills that the speakers pointed to are a direct product of the collaboration of the unions with governments and the corporations.

McManus is very familiar with this history. Her lifelong career as a union bureaucrat began as a protege of Bill Kelty, with McManus taking part in a 1994 ACTU Organising Works program he led.

Kelty, who was ACTU president from 1983 to 2000, played a central role in imposing the Price and Incomes Accords. Devised by the Hawke Labor government in the 1980s, these were pacts with big business and the unions, which provided for the deregulation of the economy, the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs and the closure of entire industries. The ACTU responded to widespread opposition to this assault by breaking up shop stewards and workplace committees.

In the 1990s, when McManus entered the bureaucracy, the unions were supporting the Keating Labor government’s introduction of enterprise bargaining. This divides employees up, workplace by workplace, and has been used by the unions and business to impose one regressive enterprise agreement after another. Enterprise bargaining has been one of the central mechanisms for repressing wages.

Over the past year, McManus and the ACTU have written a new page in this rotten record. Together with all their affiliates, they ensured that 2020 was the year with the fewest strikes in Australian history, going back to when records began in 1919. The unions forced workers to stay on the job, even when they were threatened with COVID-19 infection.

While she may denounce the Liberal-National government now, McManus was on the best of terms with it not so long ago. When the pandemic struck, she helped the government devise JobKeeper, a wage subsidy program that amounted to a massive handout to the largest corporations. At the same time, she agreed to suspend various industrial awards, forcing millions to work longer hours and stripping them of overtime payments and other rights.

In April 2020, McManus publicly declared that employers could “get everything you want” by working with the unions.

She collaborated on what was described as an almost daily basis with then Industrial Relations Minister Christian Porter, who said the ACTU leader was his new “bff” (best friends forever). No wonder McManus and the UWU were so anxious to prevent workers from raising any questions.

UWU officials ended the meeting as soon as it hit the half-hour mark. None of them, including McManus, had said anything concrete about expanding the strike, mobilising support or providing the workers with strike pay. Instead, McManus repeated the slogan “one day longer, one day stronger,” as though the continuation of the isolated strike, with production proceeding unabated at the facility, would resolve everything. This is simply a means of wearing down the workers, to the point that they are forced to accept a sell-out.

The meeting demonstrated that the UWU’s repeated attacks on Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaigners are part of a broader attempt to intimidate workers and suppress opposition from them.

Beneath the livestream of the meeting on the UWU Facebook page, one worker posted a critical comment. In response to the UWU’s request for donations, he asked “Where is the fighting fund?” of the union.

The worker recalled his own experience, noting that when jobs cuts were announced at a Woolworths warehouse in Minchinbury, “the union disappeared.” The union “allowed jobs that people held to be destroyed and replaced by managers.” During the sackings, “not one person from the union came on site to oversee the issues and speak with workers.”

The worker surmised that this was because unions had become a “big business.” “Labor and its corporate mates” had left workers to “defend themselves.” “When it comes to a strike the union distances itself because of mates in big corporations.”

Within a minute or two, the comment had been deleted from the UWU Facebook page. It provided a far more accurate description of this corporatised, anti-working-class organisation, than any of the lies from McManus and her fellow speakers.



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