

Australian union tries to ban socialists, critical workers from General Mills strike

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The United Workers Union (UWU) has escalated a campaign of intimidation and threats against socialists and other critics of its right-wing, pro-business activities, declaring that it has banned anyone who is opposed to the union leadership from approaching the General Mills strike in western Sydney.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has, for several decades, described the corporatised trade unions as an industrial police force of management. Their role has been to impose one sell-out agreement after another in league with the employers, suppress workers' opposition, ensure record low levels of industrial activity, isolate those strikes that do emerge and prop-up the big business Labor Party.

The UWU has now effectively acknowledged the correctness of the SEP's definition, publicly asserting that it has police-like powers that it will use to prevent free political discussion among workers and supporters of the General Mills strike.

In a Facebook event announcing a "union solidarity rally" to be held outside the General Mills factory this Wednesday, the UWU states: "Unionists only. Members have voted to not allow anti-union groups at the strike." The event is on the UWU's national Facebook page, signalling that this is a policy that has been adopted by its national executive, most of whom are also senior members of the Labor Party.

The edict has no political legitimacy, let alone legal standing. It is a blatant attack on core democratic rights, including freedom of speech and discussion. The UWU is asserting its "right" to bar anyone from the General Mills strike if they criticise or oppose the union leadership, even though the site is on a public street.

The UWU's claim that it is only carrying out the will of its members is a cynical attempt to palm off responsibility for its thuggish activities onto the workers. It falsely blackguards the strikers as opponents of democratic rights and unfettered political discussion, serving to further isolate their struggle.

In reality, the minute the stoppage began on May 4, the UWU flooded the site outside General Mills with its officials, "organisers" and lackeys. From the outset, they have sought to physically block SEP campaigners from even approaching the workers and have repeatedly engaged in threats of physical violence and intimidation. The UWU Facebook statement can only be read as an endorsement of these methods, which

resemble those of a criminal gang, by the union leadership.

To try to justify its attacks on democratic rights, the UWU claims to have held ballots of the workers on whether they wished for the SEP to be "removed" from the site.

The only such vote SEP members have ever seen, however, occurred on June 5. Fewer than half of the striking workers were present, and the UWU had mobilised a substantial number of its full-time staff. There was no discussion on the "motion" or vote against. Several of those standing around the agitated and aggressive UWU official who called the "ballot" raised their hands. In other words, the union is claiming the "right" to abrogate basic civil liberties, based on a vote that would hardly have passed muster in a police-state.

The UWU reportedly used the same method against the pseudo-left Solidarity organisation early in the dispute. Solidarity supports the UWU and has covered for its sell-outs in the past. But even the possibility that the pseudo-left group might make mealy-mouthed criticisms was apparently too much for the UWU officials.

Notably, the UWU has not publicly called another such ballot against the SEP since the second day of the strike, despite threatening to do so on more than one occasion. On June 12, the threat to call another vote to exclude the SEP was abandoned when an SEP member demanded the right to speak to the motion. The union is clearly fearful that workers would not vote in favour of its attacks and has instead, simply continued to direct its officials to harass and obstruct SEP campaigners.

The union's claim that any of its policies are based on the interests and democratic decisions of workers does not stand up to the slightest scrutiny. While it has been venomously hostile to socialists calling for an expansion of the strike, the UWU has made sure that production has continued unhindered throughout the stoppage. It has made no attempt to disrupt the factory's operations, and has denounced casual staff who are inside it, to ensure they do not join the struggle.

The UWU, moreover, is not paying the workers full strike pay, instead establishing an online "crowdfund." It has done nothing to mobilise the 150,000 members it claims to have or even to notify them that a strike is underway, much less to involve other workers in the food production industry or in

western Sydney where the factory is located.

It is precisely because the union is isolating the strike and preparing a sell-out that it is so hostile to any criticism. The UWU's attacks on socialists are an attack on workers themselves, aimed at creating a menacing atmosphere in which any dissent is silenced.

Already, UWU officials have snatched SEP leaflets from the hands of workers who wished to read them. During a public "forum" broadcast from General Mills last week, the union removed critical comments beneath the Facebook stream from at least one former Woolworths worker. He recalled his own experiences when the UWU facilitated the destruction of jobs at a Woolworths facility in Minchinbury. The worker concluded that the UWU and other unions were "big businesses" in their own right and noted their collaboration with the major corporations. Rather than respond, the UWU simply hit the delete button.

The UWU tacitly acknowledges that there is growing opposition to its isolation of strikes and its collaboration with management. That is why its statement on the Facebook event for Wednesday's rally begins by declaring "unionists only," but proceeds to state that members of "anti-union groups" are banned. The union is well aware that there are union members who are hostile to its sordid manoeuvres. For the "crime" of criticising the UWU leadership, they will be branded as "anti-union" and barred.

The UWU's extreme aggression and its brazen attacks on democratic rights are motivated in part by the harrowing experience of its officialdom earlier this year. For some fourteen weeks, the union isolated 350 locked-out workers at Coles' Smeaton Grange warehouse in western Sydney. As it is doing to the General Mills workers, the union hung them out to dry, refusing to provide strike pay or to broaden the stoppage to other Coles facilities.

As the dispute dragged on, and the union openly sought to impose management demands, opposition from workers grew. They repeatedly voted down a sell-out agreement, promoted by the union, for the closure of the facility and the destruction of all or most of the jobs. Increasingly, workers were raising their own independent demands, including for strike pay from the union, and were more boldly voicing their sentiments, with many telling SEP campaigners that the UWU was "in bed with management."

For the union bureaucrats and their friends in company management, this was like a nightmare come true. Since 2018, they had planned together for the "orderly closure" of the warehouse. They had done everything they could to ensure that the Smeaton Grange dispute did not spread to four other Coles warehouses also slated to be shut, including one only a few kilometres away. But not only were workers beginning to fight back. The SEP was informing staff at the other warehouses of the lockout, breaking a conspiracy of silence on the part of management and the union.

In the end, the UWU succeeded in forcing through a sell-out for mass sackings and closure at Smeaton Grange, but only after it had pauperised many of the workers and created the conditions for management to announce the indefinite extension of the lockout.

The union has drawn certain lessons from the Smeaton Grange struggle, and several other disputes. If it is compelled to call a strike, it will flood the site with its officials. They will monitor the workers, attack socialists and seek to suppress discussion, all the while collaborating with management and big-business Labor Party politicians. The UWU's response to opposition from workers, or even the potential of opposition, resembles the actions of a crisis-ridden, tin-pot dictatorship.

Workers must draw their own lessons. The UWU cannot be allowed to continue its isolation of the General Mills strike and its suppression of discussion about the way forward. Its attempts to ban socialists and workers from the site should be rejected with contempt by all sections of the working class and defenders of democratic rights.

Over the past two weeks, the UWU, by its own actions, has refuted all those who claim that the existing unions can be "reformed" or compelled to adopt policies that advance the interests of workers. Like its counterparts throughout Australia and internationally, the UWU is a company union.

Workers must establish their own organisations of struggle, including an independent rank-and-file committee to urgently broaden the strike to other food processing workers, warehouse workers and other sections of workers. They should demand that the union provide full strike pay to all the workers, including the casuals, which will enable them to join the strike. The UWU must be compelled to fully inform the GM workers what it is negotiating with management. In short, workers must prevent the UWU from imposing yet another sell-out.



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