

Australian union holds farcical “national day of action” for General Mills strike

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As this article was being posted on Friday afternoon (AEST), the United Workers Union (UWU) announced the end of the General Mills strike. The union has proclaimed a “victory.” The few facts it has made public, however, demonstrate that this is a sellout.

Pay increases are “almost” the miserly three percent per year the UWU was requesting; the union statement says nothing about the agreement addressing job security or casualisation, two of the key issues in the dispute; and strikers will receive only a \$1,500 sign-on “bonus,” less than their lost wages.

The rapid shutdown of the strike confirms the warnings made in the article below.

A “national day of action” on Wednesday called by the United Workers Union (UWU), supposedly in support of 80 striking General Mills workers in western Sydney, was a graphic demonstration of the union’s isolation of the stoppage and its attempts to sow demoralisation.

The event was based on a method that the UWU has developed over the course of several recent disputes, all of which it has sold-out.

The union, which claims 150,000 members, makes no attempt whatsoever to involve other sections of workers, ensuring a desultory turnout. Workers who take part are treated to a handful of mealy-mouthed speeches by union officials, who do not outline any plan to expand the struggle. Great emphasis is placed on photos, to bolster the UWU’s Facebook page, while a “community boycott” of the company involved is presented as an alternative to a political and industrial mobilisation of the working class.

Such events would more accurately be described as days of inaction or demobilisation. Their cumulative effect, and intended purpose, is to convince striking workers that there is no prospect of broader sections of the working class joining their struggle. Aside from some social media posts and photos, they are on their own against a multi-billion dollar transnational corporation. A sense of isolation and hopelessness is deliberately fostered by the union, so that it can present a sell-out agreement with the company as a victory.

The UWU’s failure to involve other workers in the “day of action” was not the result of incompetence or poor organising. The union appears to have allocated significant resources to the General Mills dispute, with several full-time “organisers” and officials present at the permanent “community protest” outside the factory gates at most times.

In reality, the union is actively hostile to other workers

interacting with the General Mills strikers. This would raise the necessity and the possibility of joint action and would expose the General Mills staff to the bitter experiences that workers have had with the UWU.

During Wednesday’s event, one worker commented beneath the livestream on the UWU’s Facebook page, expressing his support for the stand being taken by the General Mills workers. But he added that he had previously worked “across the road” from the General Mills plant, and the UWU “didn’t save our jobs” during a recent dispute. The comment was promptly deleted.

The same thing happened during a “wages forum” called by the UWU last week.

A worker recalled his experience in the Facebook comments beneath the stream, noting that when sackings were announced at a Woolworths warehouse in Minchinbury, the UWU “allowed jobs that people held to be destroyed and replaced by managers.” The worker concluded that this was because the union itself had become a “big business.” “When it comes to a strike the union distances itself because of mates in big corporations,” he wrote. That comment likewise vanished within minutes.

A similar dynamic has played out at the physical “community protest” outside the factory.

The UWU tells workers in the vaguest of terms that it has led a series of recent “victories,” but it has not brought any of the workers who have supposedly benefited from these struggles to the General Mills site. There has been no delegation of workers from the Coles’ Smeaton Grange warehouse, which is also located in southwestern Sydney.

Smeaton Grange workers were the subject of a UWU “day of action” last December, almost identical to the General Mills event. Over the following two months, the union continued to isolate the locked-out workers, as they were subjected to a company lockout. It refused to provide any strike pay or even to notify other Coles workers of what was taking place and forced the staff to vote on the same sellout agreement time and time again.

With the workers on the brink of destitution and facing the prospect of an indefinite extension of the lockout, the UWU succeeded in ramming through a company deal for the closure of the warehouse and the destruction of all the jobs.

The UWU has also not brought Coles and Woolworths workers from other warehouses to the General Mills site. They similarly confront plans by the corporations and the union for the shutdown of their facilities, which are set to be replaced by automated

facilities next year.

Meanwhile, Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaigners who have sought to discuss the lessons of these disputes with the General Mills workers, and a perspective for the expansion of the strike, have repeatedly been blocked by UWU officials, including with threats of physical violence and intimidation. The announcement of the “day of action” included a ban on “anti-union groups”—i.e., the SEP and any worker who might raise the UWU’s record of betrayals.

As a result of the union’s *cordon sanitaire*, only 100 or fewer people participated in the “day of action” at General Mills. They included union officials, staff-members and representatives of various pseudo-left and Stalinist organisations that function as foot soldiers of the union bureaucracy.

The speeches in the morning spanned less than half an hour, with part of that time taken up by musical performances.

Without anything of substance to say, the UWU officials turned the platform over to a Catholic priest. Father Domingo Barawid opened the rally with a prayer, before telling the workers their struggle was “not just about a pay rise” or “security of work,” but their “dignity as people who contribute to society. That is God-given. If we don’t respect that, we don’t respect God.”

The UWU’s promotion of a Catholic priest, representing a church that has supported every form of reaction over the past 500 years, is a confession of utter political bankruptcy. With no intention of mobilising genuine support for the workers, the union bureaucrats instead bring out a priest to comfort them with homilies and hazy assertions that the Christian divinity is on their side.

The UWU’s invitation to Barawid was a cynical attempt to exploit the fact that many the strikers are of Filipino descent or origin. Incapable of appealing to workers based on their common class interests, the union is instead making a pitch based on ethnic community politics and religion, serving only to divide the strikers.

Mark Morey, the secretary of Unions NSW, told the workers they had the “full support” of the “600,000 other unionists in this state.” He said nothing about what concrete forms this support would take. The same proclamations were made to the Smeaton Grange workers, as well as striking McCormick food staff in Melbourne before their strike was shut down by the UWU in April.

Much of the UWU activity on Wednesday consisted of promoting a “community boycott” through online posts. Its pathetic character is demonstrated by the fact that the union is only calling for a boycott of two General Mill product lines among dozens.

More fundamentally, the boycott is directed at atomising supporters of the strike and presenting individual consumer choices as an alternative to a mobilisation of workers, as a class. The boycott has been accompanied by UWU declarations that General Mills is being “greedy” and “unfair,” as though there are good corporations and bad. In reality, the major firms in the food production sector are all exploiting the pandemic to intensify restructuring and attacks on their employees.

The role of the boycott was summed up by pictures of support

the union solicited from its members at other factories. Rather than hold up signs backing the strike, pointing to the common issues that all workers face and calling for a joint struggle, the UWU members were directed to pledge that they would not purchase General Mills’ pasta and tacos.

The boycott tactic is also drawn from the UWU playbook developed at Smeaton Grange. So is its refusal to provide strike pay. A General Mills worker confirmed on Wednesday that after three weeks, the union has not established any genuine strike fund. Instead, workers can ask the officials for “financial assistance” to be drawn from an online crowdfunding.

In addition to hoarding the assets they control, valued last year at more than \$300 million, the UWU bureaucrats are seeking to create a situation in which workers must beg for assistance, and will thus be unlikely to criticise or differ with the union officials.

Meanwhile, production continues inside the facility unabated, because it is staffed by casual workers. The UWU, despite signing agreements allowing the use of labour hire staff and upholding the laws banning them from joining strikes, has denounced the casuals. This is a means of dividing the workforce and ensuring the casuals do not join the struggle.

The “day of action” again demonstrates that if there is going to be any genuine fight against General Mills, it must come from the workers themselves, organised independently of the union. The UWU is conducting a classic isolation operation, in preparation for a sellout. Its demands, even if they were met, would not address the issues confronting workers, such as the rampant rate of casualisation. The three percent per annum pay rise the union is calling for is barely above the rapidly rising rate of inflation.

To break the isolation of the strike, and prevent a sellout, workers must establish an independent rank-and-file committee. This is the only means of turning out to other sections of the working class, for a joint industrial and political struggle against the corporate offensive on workers’ jobs, wages and conditions. As part of this fight, workers should demand the immediate provision of full strike pay from the UWU, to both permanent staff and the casuals.



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