

Australian General Mills strike shut down by United Workers Union

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The United Workers Union (UWU) announced on Friday afternoon that it had ended the strike of more than 80 workers at the General Mills plant in western Sydney.

The rapid shutdown of the stoppage followed three weeks during which the union did everything it could to isolate the strikers, demoralise them, prevent any expansion of the struggle and ensure the continuation of production at the factory. This operation included threats and intimidation against Socialist Equality Party campaigners, the suppression of discussion among the workers, and the public declaration of a ban on any critics of the UWU attending the site.

The union's handling of the General Mills strike is consistent with a *modus operandi* established by the UWU in several recent disputes, including at Coles Smeaton Grange warehouse in southwestern Sydney and a McCormick Foods plant in Melbourne. The disputes have all been isolated, workers deprived of strike pay and their stoppages ended on the basis of dubious votes, suppressed information and hazy declarations of a "win."

The UWU's announcement on Friday makes no mention of the nature of workers' "endorsement" of the union-management offer, meaning at this point it is unclear whether all striking workers voted.

It can be surmised, however, that the sudden "endorsement," just two days after a "day of action" at which the UWU said nothing about a deal means that workers were not given any time to study the document. Based on the Smeaton Grange and McCormick Foods disputes, it is possible that workers have not even seen the agreement and have instead been forced to rely on "highlights" presented by the union, which do not include the union's concessions to management.

The speed of the shutdown also suggests that the agreement has not yet been the subject of a formal ballot, as required by law, but only of an indicative vote.

The consequence is that the strike has ended, without even the pretence of the issues in dispute having been resolved. Conveniently for management, this coincided exactly with a major coronavirus outbreak in Sydney, which resulted in a city-wide lockdown being declared the day after the stoppage was ended. The only aspect of the deal that is certain at this point, is that General Mills will have a full workforce, as demand for its

products is likely to surge during the stay-at-home orders.

The UWU's declaration of victory on Facebook provided virtually no information. The obvious question is: if this is a great victory, why is the union so intent on hiding the contents of its agreement with management?

Even the handful of details provided show that the UWU is trying to impose a deal that does not meet its own meagre demands, let alone address the issues that motivated workers to take industrial action.

According to the UWU, the workers have now "won" a wage increase of "almost 9%" over three years. This is a concession on the only concrete demand advanced during the strike, which was for nine percent over three years, not *almost* nine percent.

Even the original demand was woefully inadequate and would not "end wage stagnation" as the union claims. In fact, the agreement locks in three years of pay increases at or below the Reserve Bank of Australia's inflation target, meaning workers are likely to be worse off in real terms.

A \$1,500 sign-on "bonus" hailed by the union will only replace a fraction of lost income for the workers, who did not receive a wage from the company or strike pay from the UWU during the three-week stoppage.

The other issues central to the dispute, job security and casualisation, were not mentioned at all in the UWU statement, suggesting the new deal will not resolve workers' concerns in those areas.

Throughout the dispute, the union expressed the call for improved job security in only the most general terms, making no mention of the very real threat posed by the company's recent announcement of a global restructuring drive, including the elimination of at least 1,200 jobs around the world. Any suggestion that the General Mills workers in Australia will be exempted from this global offensive is a delusion.

The union told workers during the strike that one of its objections to the company's initial offer was a reduction in "redundancy provisions." The earlier focus on this question, since dropped, is a warning that the union knows that the company has been eyeing a reduction of its Australian workforce as part of the restructure.

The union wrote that the new deal "will see ALL conditions

maintained,” a tacit acknowledgement that the UWU did not secure a single improvement in workplace conditions, laying the groundwork for future attacks.

The final component of the union’s “win” was “protection for all labour hire casuals and contractors who participated in the strike.” This is an entirely meaningless statement. What does “protection” mean for workers who have no guarantee that their employment will continue beyond the end of their current shift?

Even if these workers could be “protected,” it is a moot point because the UWU actively prevented their involvement in the dispute, instead fostering hostility and division between permanents and casuals, the two halves of the workforce.

The large number of casual workers at General Mills is the direct product of successive enterprise agreements forced through by the UWU’s predecessor, the National Union of Workers, allowing the company to engage an unlimited number of labour-hire staff.

The union had previously raised the question of permanent jobs for casual workers as a key issue in the dispute but that has evidently been abandoned in the sell-out deal. The union’s silence on this issue, as well as its claim that “ALL conditions” have been retained, indicates that nothing has been done to secure stable employment for the casuals, leaving the door open for the company to move to ever-greater use of labour hire as permanent employees retire or move on.

Workers should view the UWU’s claims with the utmost scepticism. In both the Coles Smeaton Grange and McCormick Foods disputes, the union’s public statements contained blatant falsehoods.

At Smeaton Grange, the union declared the dispute over on the basis of a dubious internal vote and did not edit or amend its post even as the determined workers continued to reject the company’s offer in multiple official ballots and remained locked out. This was a deliberate move to lend legitimacy to the deal, prevent broader support for the locked-out workers and suppress opposition to the agreement among the rank and file.

In fact, the UWU had abandoned virtually every demand it had advanced. A call for a 5.5 percent per annum pay rise was scrapped for the company’s offer of 3.5 percent; redundancy pay was capped at 80 weeks rather than 104 as the workers had demanded; and workers were offered no guarantee of redeployment when the facility closes.

In the Smeaton Grange dispute the UWU claimed it had won “enhanced redundancy provisions” and a guarantee that no more than one-fifth of the workforce would be employed as casuals. Examination of the enterprise agreement revealed both claims to be false. Voluntary redundancies remained capped at 80, meaning around 270 workers will be forced out with lesser payments. The casual ratio was merely a target, and the agreement granted the company “flexibility” as it “downsizes” the workforce.

Above all, the company-union deal provided for the closure

of the warehouse and the destruction of all or most of the jobs, Coles’ central demand.

At McCormick Foods, the UWU made no public mention of the introduction under the enterprise agreement of a new night shift, which would reduce the company’s overtime payments. Cuts to overtime were a central issue driving the dispute and the union’s silent capitulation can only be viewed as a betrayal.

These experiences demonstrate the critical need for workers to demand that they are provided with the full text of any proposed enterprise agreement and given time to study and discuss it before a formal ballot. The deal should be made public immediately. Whatever the UWU has agreed to has implications for the entire working class.

Workers cannot accept anything at face value from the unions, who have imposed decades of sellouts, resulting in record low wage growth, the destruction of permanent jobs, and soaring casualisation. The unions are an arm of company management, as the UWU has again demonstrated in its isolation of the General Mills struggle. Their claims should be looked at with no less scepticism than the assertions of a company shareholder or a manager.

The experiences at General Mills, following those at Smeaton Grange and McCormick, show that under conditions of mounting working-class opposition, and a growing desire to fight back, the unions play the central role in preventing the development of a broader political movement of the working class.

The issues confronting workers at General Mills, and everywhere else, will not be resolved through union enterprise bargaining, which has resulted in one squalid deal after another, or the pro-business Fair Work Commission, which bans virtually all strikes. What is required is a rejection of this entire framework, which is defended by the unions, Labor and the capitalist ruling class they defend.

To organise a genuine struggle, workers need their own organisations, including rank-and-file committees completely independent of the unions. As the General Mills dispute has shown, this is the only means of ensuring free discussion among workers about the issues they face and the way forward, the full dissemination of information, and a turn to broader sections of the working class.

The SEP urges workers at General Mills to contact us, fight for the information the union is hiding about the agreement to be made public, begin a discussion on the experiences of the dispute and prepare to fight the imposition of whatever attacks the union has agreed to enforce with management.



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