

Australia: Details of McCormick Foods industrial agreement reveal union sell-out

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More than two months after the end of a six-week strike, by almost 100 manufacturing workers at a McCormick Foods plant in Melbourne, the details of the industrial agreement have been made public, via the Fair Work Commission.

The text exposes the fraud of the United Workers Union (UWU) boast of securing a significant win for the workers. Not a single improvement in conditions was won. A new night shift was agreed to, that potentially allows the company to slash overtime wage payments, along with an annual wage increase of just 3 percent.

This nominal increase, itself only marginally higher than the official cost of living, comes after five years of zero wage rises within the plant, amounting to an effective wage cut of at least 10 percent, based on cost-of-living increases over that period.

The UWU's false claim that the agreement represents a victory required the suppression of the text of the deal. In the days after the union shut down the strike, on April 7, several workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* that they had not been shown the agreement. The public announcement of the UWU-McCormick deal made no mention of one significant new change, the introduction of a new night shift.

The UWU's announcement boasted that the agreement "retain[ed] ALL previous conditions the company wanted to remove, including the four-day week roster."

McCormick Foods, a \$US24 billion multinational corporate giant, had initially issued a series of provocative demands, as part of its global restructuring and wage-cutting drive. These included ending the plant's four-day, 9.5-hour-a-shift week, and also cutting shift penalties, paid meal breaks and overtime rates.

The determination demonstrated by the striking workers, over six weeks, led corporate management to back away from these demands—at least for the time being. The UWU's boast about retaining conditions,

however, was aimed at covering up the reality that the union bureaucracy shut down the strike, without winning a single improvement in working conditions. The vast majority of the 53-page enterprise agreement was simply cut and pasted from the previous agreement, negotiated in 2014.

One change is section 24.1.3. This allows a new night shift, four days a week, "on critical lines only," from 8.30 p.m. to 6 a.m.

This potentially allows the company to operate on a 24-hour basis, without having to pay any overtime rates, thereby cutting its total wages bill, while ramping up production and boosting profits. Previously, if production continued beyond 1.30 a.m., workers on the afternoon shift (defined as any shift starting prior to 6 p.m. and finishing at or before 1.30 a.m.) would continue working while earning time-and-a-half or double time.

Throughout the McCormick workers' six-week strike, the UWU worked to isolate them and ensure their subordination to the anti-democratic Fair Work Act industrial relations regime. No other section of the working class was mobilised in support of the striking workers, including warehouse workers at a nearby distribution centre owned by McCormick. The union-organised picket outside the plant was, in reality, a pseudo-picket, with no effort made to hinder the coming and going of stockpiled supplies at the plant.

The UWU, which has \$300 million in assets, refused to provide McCormick workers with proper strike pay during the strike and instead promoted an online fundraising appeal.

During the dispute, the union promoted Labor politicians, including party leader Anthony Albanese, and Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) President Michele O'Neil. Senior parliamentarian Tanya Plibersek also appeared, immediately after a Labor Party conference, that, as the WSWS reported, "amounted to a

rather anxious pitch to the corporate elite by the Labor leaders and their trade union partners, presenting themselves as uniquely qualified to prosecute its agenda in the face of unprecedented geo-strategic and social tensions.”

At the same time, UWU officials demonstrated their hostility to WSWS reporters and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party and sought to block workers from discussing their strike with anyone critical of the union bureaucracy and its strategy. The WSWS correctly warned that the parade of Labor and ACTU leaders was part of the UWU’s sell-out plans.

The UWU utilised the same anti-democratic tactics at the previous three-month strike of 350 workers at Coles’ Smeaton Grange warehouse in Sydney (see: “Australian union rams through sell-out at Coles Smeaton Grange”), and the subsequent three-week strike of more than 80 workers at the General Mills food manufacturing plant in Sydney (see: “Australian General Mills strike shut down by United Workers Union”).

In each dispute, workers were isolated, worn down, used as props by Labor Party politicians, and then sent back to work after sordid sell-out agreements were worked out between union officials and management behind closed doors.

The three experiences—Smeaton Grange, McCormick Foods and General Mills—expose the UWU as an anti-worker organisation that serves the interests of the corporations.

Manufacturing workers, like every section of the working class, are confronted with the urgent task of building rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions, to take forward an effective fight for decent wages and working conditions. The building of rank-and-file committees is a critical political task, inseparable from the struggle against the corporate profit system itself.



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