

Jacobin whitewashes union sell-out at Australian General Mills factory

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On June 28, *Jacobin* published an article by John Falzon entitled “Workers in Australia Launched a Strike Against General Mills. They Just Won.” This followed just five days after an earlier piece, purportedly written by an anonymous General Mills worker, “General Mills Workers Speak Out: ‘Be Strong, Fight for Your Rights, and Fight for a Decent Pay Raise’.”

The central thrust of both articles was to whitewash the role of the United Workers Union (UWU) in isolating and ultimately selling out more than 80 workers at the General Mills food production plant in Rooty Hill.

It is significant that *Jacobin*, a US-based pseudo-left website and magazine closely affiliated with the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), would devote two articles to a small dispute in western Sydney which was almost entirely ignored by the corporate media in Australia.

Jacobin’s coverage of the General Mills dispute is designed to prevent what the upper-middle-class layers it represents fear most—any outbreak of the class struggle that threatens the grip of the trade union bureaucracy in the US or internationally.

While Falzon characterises the General Mills dispute as a “remarkable victory” and a model for workers to follow, it was, in reality, a significant betrayal by the union bureaucracy.

After three weeks on strike, the UWU rammed through a sell-out deal that fell short of the union’s meagre demand for a 3 percent per annum pay rise, and did nothing to address the other key issues in the dispute, job security and rampant casualisation.

Falzon falsely claims that the deal accepted by the UWU includes “a wage rise of 9 percent over three years,” but in fact workers will receive a mere 8.25 percent pay rise over that period. This is unlikely to even cover the rising cost of living, let alone reverse the years of wage stagnation that Falzon points to as a major concern for the Australian working class.

On the contrary, the miserly pay increases hailed as victories in recent disputes including at General Mills, McCormick Foods and Smeaton Grange demonstrate that workers cannot fight wage suppression or any other attacks on their jobs and conditions within the framework of the unions.

Pointing to the “inequality and hardship” faced by casual workers, Falzon states: “Insecure workers are less likely to take the kind of strike action that the General Mills staff took, because they feel atomised, vulnerable, and in no position to demand better wages and conditions.”

In the Rooty Hill dispute, the UWU played a leading role in this atomisation. Although the wages of casual workers at the plant are determined by the enterprise agreement, they are excluded from the bargaining process because they are not directly employed by General Mills. This is a product of Australia’s draconian industrial relations laws, rooted in the Hawke-Keating Labor governments of the 1980s and 90s and enforced by the unions.

Far from objecting to these anti-democratic restrictions, codified in the last federal Labor government’s Fair Work legislation, the UWU

embraced them, promoting hostility between the striking permanent workers and the casuals, who had no legal option but to continue working.

The union itself is responsible for the fact that around half of the plant’s workforce is “vulnerable” in this way. The UWU and its predecessor, the National Union of Workers, have, in successive enterprise agreements since at least 2004, allowed General Mills to employ an unlimited number of casuals through labour hire firms, with no obligation to offer them permanent jobs.

While “improved job security” was a key concern for workers in the dispute, the union’s proclamation that all conditions from the previous enterprise agreement have been retained, indicates that the UWU has again allowed this to continue.

Falzon also parrots the UWU claim of “protection for all labour hire casuals and contractors who participated in the strike.” As well as being vague to the point of meaninglessness, this claim is largely irrelevant, because the union’s divisive actions ensured any such participation was non-existent.

The concluding sentence of Falzon’s article, “When the going gets tough, the only way for workers to win is to get organised in their unions — and to strike,” is aimed at diverting the mounting anger and frustration of workers back into the confines of the trade union movement.

For the past 40 years, the unions have presided over the suppression of the class struggle. Last year, amid the crisis of the pandemic, used by the ruling elite to intensify the assault on the working class, the unions ensured the lowest level of industrial action in history. When they are compelled to call stoppages, as at General Mills, the unions isolate them, refuse to provide strike pay and end them with a sell-out.

If Falzon’s article were accurate, he would have written that the only way for workers to ensure a successful strike, or any other struggle, is through a rebellion against the unions.

Falzon’s effusive praise for the union’s handling of the General Mills dispute is hardly surprising, given his background. Prior to his current role at the union-backed think tank Per Capita, he was CEO of Catholic charity St Vincent de Paul for 17 years, before resigning in 2018, to make a (failed) bid for Labor preselection for the federal seat of Canberra.

It was clear from the beginning of the Rooty Hill dispute that the union had no intention of carrying out a genuine fight against the company. The UWU made no attempt to mobilise its 150,000 members, or appeal to broader sections of the working class, who confront precisely the same attacks as the workers at General Mills.

Instead, an army of UWU officials flooded the site in a desperate bid to prevent Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members from speaking to workers and offering them an alternative perspective. This is not just because they knew that the SEP would expose their past betrayals, but because the SEP fights for precisely what the unions are tasked with suppressing, an independent mobilisation of the working class.

As they were attacking socialists, the UWU officials brought a conga line of Labor Party MPs and national union bureaucrats to the factory

gates, all of whom have a record of enforcing wage and job cuts. While Falzon hails these cynical exercises as an inspiring display of “solidarity,” their transparent purpose was to prevent free political discussion among the workers, and to ensure the grip of the big business Labor Party and the union bureaucracy.

The intervention of the SEP into the General Mills dispute cannot be discounted as a factor prompting the involvement of *Jacobin*. With the UWU having failed to deter SEP campaigners through a campaign of intimidation and threats of violence, and conscious that the WSWS was exposing every detail of the sell-out in real time, it became necessary for the pseudo-left to step in and try to shore-up the position of the officialdom.

The UWU did not establish a strike fund, despite holding more than \$300 million in assets and over \$94 million in cash and equivalents. Instead, workers struggling to make ends meet were forced to beg the union for handouts, from a crowd-funding campaign established in their name by the UWU. This ensured that every passing day put workers under greater pressure to accept whatever rotten deal the union and management cooked up.

Falzon, his social philanthropy notwithstanding, did not publicly object to this starvation operation, targeting low-paid food production workers.

On June 23, as the union prepared to wind up the dispute, the UWU held a farcical “national day of action,” primarily a social media campaign calling for a consumer boycott of General Mills products.

Significantly, while the UWU wheeled out priests and top union officials, no workers from Smeaton Grange, McCormicks, or other disputes where “victories” were purportedly made, were brought to the protest. The reason why was made clear, when critical comments from workers in factories where the UWU had overseen sellouts were immediately deleted from the union’s Facebook page. This made plain that the attempted silencing of the SEP was in order to suppress any criticism of the union by workers themselves.

Published the same day, the first *Jacobin* article, attributed to a General Mills worker, under the pseudonym Amanda Macintyre, made clear that the UWU was conditioning workers to accept a sell-out.

Macintyre, repeating the line of the UWU officialdom, wrote: “After three weeks on strike, the company hasn’t changed. They haven’t accepted our demand of 3 percent. But we have changed. We’ve built a stronger sense of community and solidarity with each other. ... When we go back inside, I know we will have each other’s backs.”

In other words, never mind what rotten sell-out the union strikes with the company, we will all somehow be better off as a result of the experience.

Notably, the recent Smeaton Grange lockout was also covered by *Jacobin*, in an article which, remarkably, made no mention of the union at all, despite being written by a UWU “policy adviser.” While the piece was published relatively early in the dispute, it made clear that the union had no intention of opposing the destruction of essentially all jobs at the warehouse, on the basis that this was an inevitable product of automation.

Jacobin’s intervention into the Smeaton Grange dispute was motivated by the recognition of mounting discontent among workers over the union’s collaboration with management. The fact that this later developed into an incipient rebellion, that threatened to escape the union’s control, explains the attention paid to the General Mills strike by the flagship publication of the international pseudo-left.

Jacobin’s sudden interest in Australian industrial disputes points to the sensitivity of its upper-middle-class milieu to any upsurge in the global class struggle and the ability of the unions to suppress it. Now, more than at any time for several decades, the ruling class is depending on the unions to hold back a mounting wave of working-class unrest.

Jacobin has been heavily promoted by the *New York Times* and other organs of the US oligarchy. Its editorial line centers on the promotion of

the unions, big business Democratic Party politicians, and identity politics, where race, gender and sexual orientation are promoted as central issues to divide the working class and prevent its unification.

Jacobin’s staff have the closest of ties to the Democratic Party, one of the two parties of the American bourgeoisie, and are themselves integrated into the union apparatus. Its attention to Australian industrial developments, thus undoubtedly reflects concerns within the American ruling elite itself.

Under conditions of a global resurgence of the working class, *Jacobin* is seeking to convince workers that their interests can only be advanced within the confines of the unions, and to paper over the role of the bureaucracy in enforcing decades of attacks on the working class in Australia and around the world.

This is directed against a developing rebellion by workers against these corporatised organisations, and their suppression of the class struggle. While remaining silent on the issue, there is no doubt that *Jacobin* is closely following the Volvo Trucks dispute in Virginia, where striking workers have voted down three concessions contracts, openly promoted by the corrupt United Auto Workers (UAW) union, and have established a rank-and-file committee to advance their independent interests, in opposition to the company and the bureaucracy.

The WSWS has explained, “The development of the class struggle completely refutes the efforts of pseudo-left groups to portray the unions as the only legitimate form of working class organisation.”

The positions of the pseudo-left are not the result of a misunderstanding. “Rather, the opponents of rank-and-file organisations are horrified by the growth of an insurrectionary movement against the bureaucracy. They are aligned with powerful sections of the ruling class, including the Biden administration, that correctly see in the trade unions essential instruments for suppressing the class struggle. Representing privileged sections of the upper middle class, their aim is to perpetuate a ‘labor movement’ that is integrated into the state and corporate management.”

Workers must reject *Jacobin*’s propagandising for these rotten organisations and make a conscious break with the unions. The defence of workers’ jobs, pay and basic rights requires the formation of new organisations of struggle, including rank-and-file committees, and a fight for socialism.



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