

SunRice grain processing and packing workers strike for two days at six facilities in Australia

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Around 330 Ricegrowers Ltd. grain processing and packing workers across six SunRice, CopRice and Australian Grain Storage facilities in New South Wales and Victoria struck for 48 hours beginning Tuesday morning.

In December, 98 percent of United Workers Union (UWU) members at the facilities voted in favour of the industrial action, after a proposed enterprise agreement (EA) from the company was overwhelmingly rejected. Union-management negotiations for the new agreement have been underway for eight months.

That the UWU was compelled to call a two-day strike, the first industrial action at the company in decades, reflects growing concerns among workers over the rampant spread of COVID-19, especially in key supply-chain industries including food production, transport and warehousing.

The company is attempting to carry out this assault under conditions of a bumper harvest, and while workers are already being forced to cover for large numbers of sick coworkers and face infection with COVID-19 themselves.

According to the union, at times up to 15 percent of the workforce has been out with the virus across the six sites. The UWU says nothing about the danger to workers from COVID-19, merely raising that workers have been forced to put in substantial overtime.

A Ricegrowers spokesperson turned this reality on its head, criticising workers for causing “disruption to SunRice’s operations at a time when the company is processing the largest rice crop in a number of years and also facing supply chain pressures due to COVID-19.”

In other words, the company is demanding workers must submit to an attack on conditions and a retrograde pay offer, while continuing to risk their health and lives

amid the raging pandemic, in order to deliver a massive increase in profits.

The reality is, previous union-management deals have already granted the company the right to shut down production in the event of supply shortages, ensuring that workers, not the company, pay the price in lean years.

The previous EA was set to expire in April 2020, but management and the union agreed to extend the agreement until July 2021, locking in a sub-inflationary 1.5 to 2 percent pay increase over 14 months.

Similar measures were carried out at the time by all the major unions across numerous industry sectors under the pretext of COVID-19. The real purpose of such arrangements was to aid the unions in suppressing opposition to the continued operation of factories despite the virus and a major assault on jobs and conditions carried out during the pandemic.

Under Australia’s draconian industrial laws, workers cannot legally take industrial action outside of narrow enterprise bargaining periods. This prohibition, introduced by the Keating Labor government in 1993 and extended with the enactment of “Fair Work” by the Rudd-Gillard Labor government in 2009, is enforced by the unions to isolate workers and confine disputes to individual workplaces.

The “Fair Work” laws do include provisions for indefinite strikes over health and safety issues, but the UWU, like the rest of Australia’s trade unions, has refused to invoke them even as COVID-19 has decimated the workforce. Instead, the unions have played a key role in keeping workers on the job throughout the pandemic.

When forced to call strikes, the unions have shut down any discussion of broader political issues, including the pandemic crisis, and kept disputes within the narrow confines of negotiations over pay.

With workers' wages already going backwards as a result of the union-management delay, Ricegrowers is now offering a 2.5 percent annual wage "rise," which would not be backdated to the (extended) expiry of the last agreement.

The UWU stated that some casual workers are "paid less than they would earn if they were engaged under the modern award." As a result of previous union-management agreements, shift penalties at the company are calculated on base wages, excluding the casual loading of 25 percent, meaning casual workers receive no additional pay for night and early-morning shifts.

Far from a fight for secure permanent jobs for these vulnerable workers, the union is merely calling for them to be paid as much as the minimum rates set out in the industrial award.

In "exchange" for the paltry wage offer, the company is also attempting to abolish leave provisions for volunteer firefighters, blood donors and victims of domestic violence.

The UWU is seeking a meagre 4 percent annual pay rise, well short of the rapidly rising cost of living. In the twelve months to December 2021, the official Consumer Price Index (CPI) rose 3.5 percent, but the cost of basic items increased even more.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the price of non-discretionary goods and services, including food, fuel, housing, utilities, school fees and health care, went up by 4.5 percent in 2021. The largest increase was in the price of automotive fuel, which swelled 32.3 percent over the year.

For the striking workers, who mostly earn between \$23 and \$25 per hour, the union's 4 percent figure will amount to a pay cut in real terms.

In fact, there is every chance the UWU will attempt to ram through an even lower increase. Already, the union has offered numerous concessions to the company. The union lamented on its campaign page for the dispute: "The UWU has withdrawn multiple claims in good faith but has not been met with the same courtesy."

In other words, even as the union abandons workers' demands one by one, the company is pressing for a greater attack on pay and conditions.

The union's recent track record stands as a further warning to SunRice workers that a sell-out is being prepared.

At the Coles warehouse in Smeaton Grange in Sydney, 350 workers were locked out for more than three months, beginning in November 2020, after refusing to accept an

EA which included the planned shutdown of their warehouse. In league with management, the UWU repeatedly attempted to ram through a deal that workers rejected on eleven occasions and refused to mobilise any workers from other Coles warehouses or elsewhere. Despite having \$300 million in assets, the union provided no strike pay and the workers were starved back to work after a courageous 14-week struggle.

At the McCormick Foods plant in Clayton, Victoria, 100 workers struck for six weeks in early 2021, as the company refused to negotiate a new EA. The UWU claimed a victory when workers received a 3 percent pay increase, but this came after losing 10 percent in real terms as their wages had not increased in the previous five years.

In June 2021, after three weeks on strike, 80 workers at General Mills in the Sydney suburb of Rooty Hill were sold out in a UWU-brokered deal that delivered less than the union's meagre 3 percent pay demand and did nothing to address the other key issues in the dispute, job security and rampant casualisation.

As was the case in all of these disputes, the UWU is making no appeal for a broader mobilisation of workers against the attacks at Ricegrowers. The union has issued a meek call for "community members" to send a text message to the company's human resources manager containing a polite request for a "rethink."

Throughout the pandemic, the unions' utter disregard for the health and lives of workers has been on stark display, as time and time again they have enforced the demands of management to keep workers on the job. The working class should draw sharp conclusions from this, and from the significant disputes of the past year.

The struggle for improved wages and conditions cannot be separated from the fight to end the global pandemic. Workers at Ricegrowers, throughout the food processing industry and more broadly, must join with teachers, nurses, parents and students in a unified struggle against this existential threat to the working class.

The first step in this critical fight is a conscious break with the corporatised trade unions, and the formation of independent rank-and-file committees at every workplace.



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