

Workers locked out at Australian plastics manufacturer Qenos

Our reporters
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More than 30 plastics manufacturing workers are locked out at Qenos's Altona plant in Melbourne's western suburbs in a dispute over wages, conditions and safety. The mainstream media, official political parties and the trade unions are all engaged in an isolation operation, meaning that most other workers have not even heard about the aggressive actions of Qenos.

The polyethylene plant operators walked off the job Monday after a unanimous vote to strike as part of an enterprise bargaining dispute. The company responded with an indefinite lockout.

Qenos is offering pay "rises" of just 2 percent this year, followed by 4.5 percent in 2023 and 3 percent in 2024. With the official rate of inflation already at 6.1 percent in the June quarter and expected to reach almost 8 percent by the end of the year, this would amount to a massive pay cut in real terms.

Workers are demanding a wage increase of 7 percent in each of the three years of the contract, increased staffing to address safety concerns and the abolition of a two-tier wage structure, as well as other improvements to working conditions.

Richard, a worker at the site told the *World Socialist Web Site* the vote to strike came after months of negotiation in which Qenos refused to address "90 percent" of the issues in their log of claims, despite "telling us all year they're in profit—they're up \$60 million."

Richard explained the two-tier wage system: "We've got a trainee system set up here which is essentially a cheap labour system. We are trying to abolish that. Trainees start on a low wage and by the fourth year of their training they are still getting \$50,000 less than fully-trained workers. The trainees are nearly fully trained after two years, so then they are doing the same work as the fully qualified for much less money. This was introduced in the last EA."

Another worker, Brian, said: "It's basically an apprenticeship but there's no conditions to it. You don't get a certificate. In my eyes, if there's no certification it shouldn't be an apprenticeship."

This provision, which the Australian Workers' Union (AWU) signed off on in 2019, has proved especially beneficial for the company since a nearby Qenos plastics plant was shut down last year. The company used the closure to shed much of its more experienced workforce.

Another worker, Bill, explained: "The older guys who took the redundancies were all fully trained but half the guys they replaced them with are trainees so they are saving a truckload of money. It's going to be four years before they have to pay the trainees the full wages."

The workers are also concerned about safety at the plant. Bill said: "Every time we walk through these gates we are risking our lives. About a month ago we had a high voltage line explode. We were on shift at the time and I can tell you it's scary."

Brian said: "We all believe its unsafe and we're overworked. Less than half our workforce has the appropriate skills to run the plant, so there are situations where people call in sick and half our workforce can't cover them."

The lockout of the operators means the plant is shut down, but the unions covering other sections of workers at the facility have called no industrial action, meaning workers are legally required to cross the picket line although there is no work for them to do.

This is despite the fact that around 90 other Qenos workers, covered by the United Workers Union (UWU), Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union (AMWU) and Communications, Electricians and Plumbers Union (CEPU), recently voted unanimously to strike.

What is being carried out by these unions and the AWU is a coordinated effort to isolate the locked-out workers and sow division in the Qenos workforce in order to

prevent a broader rebellion of workers. The union's objective is to wear workers down before ramming through a sell-out agreement that resolves none of their demands.

Further demonstrating this isolation, the AWU has limited any mention of the lockout to its Victorian branch Facebook page, in an attempt to keep workers at the Qenos facility in Port Botany, New South Wales, in the dark.

For more than two decades, the AWU and all other unions covering workers at the Altona plant have presided over a constant restructuring process, in order to boost company profits. This has resulted in the slashing of hundreds of jobs and the continual erosion of working conditions and safety.

Since at least 2001, every enterprise agreement rammed through by the unions has contained a clause that provides for "continuous change during the life of this agreement." The agreement continues: "We recognise that as a result of changes to ensure the business competitiveness, employee numbers will reduce during the life of the agreement."

In other words, the unions have given Qenos prior approval to destroy the livelihoods of their members whenever the company chooses.

If a worker's position is deemed "surplus" and another suitable role is available at the facility, the worker must either take the job, even if it means a pay cut of up to 15 percent, or resign.

The AWU's orientation is entirely towards shoring up the profits of Qenos and the other major corporations for which it serves as an industrial police force. In addition to facilitating decades of cuts, the union is also completely on board with the demands of major manufacturing businesses for reduced input costs.

Last week, the AWU welcomed a plan by the federal Labor government to guarantee that manufacturers in Australia will not be charged more than overseas customers for gas. The AWU is calling for the government to go further and implement a "gas reservation scheme" to protect manufacturers from global energy price increases.

While couched in phoney claims of preventing "thousands of job losses," the real motivation behind this demands was made clear by AWU acting national secretary Stephen Crawford, who said such a scheme would "allow our manufacturers to sleep at night."

Such nationalist appeals to support "Australian" business, absurd on their face given that the

manufacturers in question are invariably, like Qenos, vast multi-national corporations, are an attempt to divert workers' attention away from the real perpetrators of decades of attacks on the working class: big business, Labor and the unions themselves.

The unions' campaign to isolate the locked-out workers and suppress their dispute, along with their role in enforcing more than twenty years of cuts at Qenos and throughout the working class, stand as a warning that there is no way forward for these workers within the framework of the trade unions.

Instead, workers must take matters into their own hands and form a rank-and-file committee, completely independent of the unions, to bring together workers throughout the plant. Through this committee, workers can democratically determine a set of demands based on their needs, not the demands of the company for ever-greater profits, and develop a fighting plan of action.

This will require reaching out to broader layers of the working class, beginning with Qenos workers at the Sydney plant and other manufacturing workers across the country and around the world.

A particular turn should be made to the 70 workers who have been locked out for more than three weeks by plasterboard manufacturer Knauf at its Port Melbourne facility, less than 15 kilometres away. Like the Qenos workers, they are being hung out to dry by the unions, allowing the company to proceed with aggressive attacks.

Above all, what is required is a fight for the establishment of workers' governments to establish socialist policies, including placing critical manufacturing facilities, along with energy producers and other vital infrastructure, under democratic workers' ownership and control. Only this will allow society and the economy to be reorganised to meet the needs of the working class, not the profit demands of the financial and corporate elite.



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