Australia: Food manufacturing workers in Melbourne begin indefinite strike at Pampas

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Around 50 food manufacturing workers at the Pampas pastry factory in Footscray, Victoria, began an indefinite strike on Monday, walking off the job for the first time in 20 years. The workers voted unanimously to strike after rejecting a three-year agreement including a pay "increase" of 4 percent per annum, far below the official inflation rate of 7.3 percent.

The striking workers are also demanding that 15 of their colleagues, who are engaged as casuals through third-party labour hire, be offered permanent jobs. Some have been working in the same "casual" positions for up to 20 years.

The workers at Footscray make fruit-mince pies, frozen pastry products and flatbreads for major retailers including Bakers Delight and the two dominant supermarket chains, Coles and Woolworths. The factory is owned by Goodman Fielder, which has 5,000 employees, revenues of over $1 billion and produces over 120 different brands of food products throughout Australia and Asia. Goodman Fielder is in turn owned by Singapore-based global food producer Wilmar International.

While workers told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters they wanted an 8 percent pay rise, the United Workers Union (UWU) has called for "about $1.60 per hour," less than 6 percent per annum. While UWU organiser Andy Giles claimed the union was asking for "a fair pay rise that recognises rising cost of living," the meagre pay demand it is advancing represents a cut in real wages for the workers, most of whom currently earn just $27.61 per hour.

In other words, the UWU was ready to sell Pampas workers out before the strike even began! The fact that the woefully inadequate pay claim has been expressed by the union leadership in such vague terms indicates that it will attempt to ram through an offer from the company of even less.

The UWU is highly sensitive to any discussion of what it is preparing at Pampas, or of its role in betraying previous struggles. This explains the actions of union officials at the strike on Monday when Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members visited the facility. When one worker engaged in an extended and open discussion with the SEP, despite the attempts of UWU organisers to shut down the conversation, two workers were sent to frogmarch him away like a criminal.

This is a revealing demonstration of the UWU's attitude to the democratic rights of its members and the lengths to which the union bureaucracy will go to prevent the exposure of its filthy record.

While UWU national secretary Tim Kennedy, whose annual salary and superannuation total more than $272,000, declared this dispute "the struggle of our time," the truth is that the UWU, and its predecessor, United Voice, are directly responsible for both the low wages at the plant and the precarious conditions under which a quarter of the workforce is employed.

Successive union-brokered enterprise agreements have allowed the use of labour-hire casuals, but these workers are not covered by those agreements and have no legal right to join the strike. Facing the possibility of being fired on the spot if they refuse to work, they are compelled to continue manning the production line.

The UWU also covers warehouse workers at the site, but under a separate enterprise agreement that does not expire until next year. This means they are also prohibited from participating in the action by Australia's draconian anti-strike laws, which were implemented in 2009 by the Rudd Labor government. The unions, which have supported and enforced the Fair Work Act ever since, are now promoting the

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Albanese Labor government's new industrial relations bill, which will grant the industrial courts even greater powers to shut down strikes and impose the demands of big business through arbitration.

As long as the Pampas dispute is left in the hands of the UWU bureaucracy, it will lead down the same path of betrayal experienced by workers in several key disputes over the past two years.

At the Smeaton Grange Coles supermarket warehouse in southwest Sydney, around 350 workers were locked out by management for 14 weeks starting in November 2020. The UWU isolated the dispute, not even telling its members in other Coles distribution centres about the company's attack, let alone mobilising workers to oppose the lockout or the construction of temporary warehouses, ensuring that operations were not disrupted.

While the union facilitated the continued profits of Coles, it refused to provide strike pay, meaning every passing day put workers under more pressure to accept a rotten agreement. Working hand-in-glove with management, the UWU called one vote after another, urging workers to approve an essentially unchanged deal. The determined workers resisted the unions' attempts to sell them out for more than three months, before the campaign of starvation and isolation wore them down and the union-management deal was passed by a narrow margin.

While the union had initially advanced a wage increase demand of 5.5 percent, workers received just 3.5 percent, while maximum redundancy payouts—a key issue as the warehouse is slated to close—were capped at 80 weeks' pay, rather than the 104 weeks demanded by workers.

At the Rooty Hill General Mills food manufacturing facility in Western Sydney, around 80 workers went on strike for three weeks in mid-2021 before the UWU pushed through a pay "rise" of less than 3 percent per annum, falsely promoted by the union as a "victory" for workers. Again, workers were provided with no strike pay, despite the massive resources of the UWU, which on June 30, 2021 reported net assets of $272 million, including $35.7 million in cash.

In both of those disputes, the UWU sought to suppress democratic discussion among workers, including by preventing SEP campaigners from speaking with staff. At Smeaton Grange, this was clearly connected to fears that the incipient rebellion of workers against the union-company sell-out would link up with the alternative perspective of a genuine struggle being advanced by the SEP.

To prevent the UWU from imposing yet another rotten betrayal, Pampas workers will need to form their own organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, completely independent of the unions. These committees will provide the mechanism to democratically discuss, prepare and fight for demands based on the needs of workers, not what the company or union says is affordable or "fair."

Pampas workers cannot wage this fight alone. They must reach out to the growing layers of workers entering the class struggle as corporations demand ever-greater cuts to pay and conditions amid surging living costs. In the September quarter, more than 23,600 workers covered by enterprise agreements across the country voted for industrial action, adding to the tens of thousands already involved in protracted disputes.

This is part of a global resurgence of workers around the world, who all confront a similar assault on their living and working conditions and who all face the same challenge of overcoming decades of suppression by the trade unions in order to fight back.

Ultimately, what is posed to workers at Pampas and throughout the world is a political struggle, against a united front of big business, governments and the unions. The struggle for decent wages and conditions is inseparable from a fight for an alternative, socialist, perspective to end the subordination of workers' interests to the profit demands of the financial and corporate elite.

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