

Australia: Multinational food corporation uses desperate measures against striking Pampas pastry workers

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As the strike by food manufacturing workers at the Pampas pastry factory in West Footscray enters its third week, the company has resorted to provocative attacks against the striking workers.

The indefinite strike at the Melbourne plant began on November 21, after workers rejected the company's proposed enterprise agreement, containing a 4 percent pay "rise," far short of the rising cost of living.

While workers called for an 8 percent per annum pay rise, in line with current and predicted inflation, the United Workers' Union is asking for just 6 percent, a pay cut in real terms. The workers are also demanding that the company offer permanent jobs to around 15 workers employed as "casuals," some of whom have worked at the facility for more than 15 years.

The casual workers, employed through a labour hire agency, have no legal right to join the industrial action and are being forced to work through the strike or face the sack.

While the Melbourne factory represents only a small part of its billion-dollar multi-national operation, Goodman Fielder has responded to the strike with immense hostility. On November 25, the fifth day of the strike, firefighters were called to the site over a campfire workers were maintaining, which was safely contained in a metal drum. The UWW alleged that the company called the fire brigade in a deliberate attempt to "disrupt lawful industrial action" and to intimidate the striking workers.

Following this, representatives of company management visited local residents and businesses, issuing them with \$100 gift cards and letters urging them to call the police if they felt harassed or inconvenienced by the strike. In response, a number of neighbours gave the vouchers to the striking workers, organised a barbecue and made placards declaring "We support Pampas workers on strike!"

Workers told *World Socialist Web Site* reporters they are facing real cost of living pressures and need a pay rise. One worker said he earns around \$850 per week (\$45,000 per

year) and has a loan repayment of \$400 per week, leaving very little for household expenses.

These grim conditions, along with the highly exploitative prolonged use of labour-hire casuals, are the product of successive enterprise agreements, negotiated and enforced by the UWW and its predecessor, United Voice.

The workers reported that Pampas had products stored off site in two large frozen storage locations, but one of those facilities has run out of stock and there is no inventory of some products, including flatbread wraps. The workers also noted that the pre-Christmas period is the busiest time of the year for Pampas sales.

Workers said that the full staff base of around 80 workers usually produces 80 pallets of stock, each containing 60 boxes, per day. The skeleton crew of labour-hire casuals still working in the factory is only able to produce around a dozen pallets per day.

This goes some way to explaining the intimidation tactics employed by management to try to force workers back on the job. What it does not explain is why the UWW bureaucracy is responding to the company's vicious attacks with a pathetic campaign of public relations stunts and plaintive appeals to the corporate bosses of Pampas and its customers.

An online petition created by the UWW advances a plaintive appeal to Goodman Fielder CEO Gurpreet Vohra, condemning the "disrespectful treatment that predominantly migrant workers at your Pampas factory [have] endured," and asking him to "reconsider these actions and use your influence as CEO to ensure these workers get a fair deal."

In other words, the union bureaucracy is politely asking Vohra to be "fair," rather than "terrible" and "cruel." The suggestion that the Goodman Fielder boss would respond to this moral appeal and is not in fact directing the drive to shut down the strike, impose real wage cuts and maintain the precarious conditions of casual workers at Pampas is absurd.

On November 24, the UWW organised a contingent of

workers to protest in front of the corporate headquarters of one of Pampas's customers, Bakers Delight. Pampas supply fruit mince pies and other products to Bakers Delight retail bakeries.

UWU organiser Tim Benfatto demanded that Bakers Delight management "get on the phone to Goodman Fielder and tell them to fix things." Any conception that workers can advance their demands through appeals to one corporation to appeal to another is nothing more than a lie, promoted by the union bureaucracy as a means of diverting workers from taking up a genuine struggle. Bakers Delight has the same profit interest in maintaining low wages at its supplier as Pampas itself does.

On Saturday, a "community rally" was organised by the UWU. Luke Hilakari, Victorian Trades Hall Council Secretary spoke, offering vague promises of "solidarity" from the unions his peak body represents. He gave the Pampas workers nothing concrete other than an offer to replenish the fire wood for the picket camp fire.

Tim Kennedy, who earns \$272,000 per year as national secretary of the UWU, addressed the rally. He said: "We need a machine in this country to break down inequality and that machine is the unions."

In fact, Kennedy represents the very "machine" that holds chief responsibility for the destruction of wages and conditions over the past four decades. The union bureaucrats have been the critical mechanism for imposing one setback after another on workers' wages and conditions through the mechanisms of enterprise bargaining and the draconian anti-strike "Fair Work" legislation.

Now, Australia's union leaders are enthusiastically promoting the "Secure Jobs, Better Pay" bill rushed through federal parliament last week by the Labor government. These new laws will give the pro-business Fair Work Commission even greater powers to shut down industrial disputes, ban strikes and impose the wage- and condition-slashing demands of big business on workers through arbitration.

The UWU bureaucracy is promoting these futile stunts and phoney shows of "solidarity" in order to cover up its campaign of isolation. Nothing is being done to mobilise workers in other Goodman Fielder factories around the country. Many are unaware of the strike, while one worker at a Goodman Fielder facility in Sydney told the WSWS the union had merely left some pamphlets in the break room.

Striking workers told the WSWS they were receiving only \$500 per week from the UWU in strike pay, barely more than half the already barely survivable wages paid by the company. The UWU's refusal to provide full strike pay from its immense resources makes clear that the union bureaucracy is working with management to starve workers

out until they have no choice but to accept a sell-out deal.

As long as the Pampas dispute remains under the control of the union bureaucracy, it will follow the same trajectory of betrayal presided over by the UWU in several key disputes over recent years. Strikers' demands have been unmet and real wage cuts imposed by the union at Coles Smeaton Grange, General Mills and McCormick Foods.

To achieve decent wages and secure jobs, Pampas workers urgently need to establish a rank-and-file committee independent of the union bureaucracy. This committee will provide the means to formulate a set of demands based on the needs of workers, not what management or the unions say is possible, and a plan of action to fight for them.

This will require a turn to other sections of workers to prepare a unified struggle for real pay rises and improvements to conditions. This means linking up with workers at other Goodman Fielder factories across the country, as well as broader layers throughout food manufacturing and beyond. Instead of the bankrupt UWU appeals to Bakers Delight management, Pampas workers should reach out to the thousands of highly exploited workers at the company, along with those at other Pampas customers, including the major supermarket chains, Woolworths and Coles.

A new, socialist perspective is required. Workers cannot defend their jobs and conditions if they accept the "right" of corporations to slash costs in order to drive up profits. The basic rights of workers can be guaranteed only if industry is operated on a different principle, of serving the needs of workers and society. This means placing businesses throughout the critical food manufacturing sector, as well as other major corporations and the banks, under public ownership and democratic workers' control.



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