

Australia: Union isolation of Pampas pastry workers' strike continues

John Wilson, Martin Scott
14 December 2022

An indefinite strike by more than 50 workers at the Pampas pastry and flatbread factory in Melbourne, Victoria is now halfway through its fourth week. Workers at the Footscray plant walked out on November 21 after rejecting the company's offer of a 4 percent per annum pay "rise."

While workers initially demanded an annual wage increase of 8 percent, the United Workers Union (UWU) bureaucracy has advanced a meagre claim of around 6 percent, less than the official inflation rate of 7.3 percent and far short of the rapidly increasing cost of living.

The union's dismissal of the workers' original pay demand as unrealistic illustrates that a sell-out was being prepared even before the strike began.

What the UWU leadership claims is a "fair pay rise" is in fact a pay cut on top of already low wages. Most Pampas workers are paid just \$27.61 per hour, a product of successive sell-out deals imposed by the union bureaucracy.

Workers are also demanding permanency for Pampas workers who are engaged as casuals by a third-party labour-hire firm, in some cases working full-time hours, in the same role, for up to 20 years. Under these precarious employment conditions, the use of which has been endorsed by the UWU and its predecessors in previous enterprise agreements, workers have no guaranteed hours or leave entitlements.

Pampas workers have told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the factory is continuing to operate at reduced capacity, with production lines staffed by casual workers who could be fired if they joined the strike. Workers in the factory's warehouse, while covered by the UWU, are employed under a separate enterprise agreement, meaning they are also legally prohibited from taking part in the dispute.

The UWU bureaucracy, along with the rest of the trade union apparatus, agree with and enforce these draconian anti-strike laws, which were introduced by the Hawke-Keating Labor governments in the 1980s and 1990s and made more stringent by the Rudd-Gillard Labor government's Fair Work Act in 2009.

The unions rely upon this legislation to justify their role in every dispute, isolating workers from their counterparts in workplaces throughout the country and around the world who confront the same issues.

Pampas is part of Goodman Fielder, a multinational food manufacturing corporation that reported revenue of more than \$1 billion last financial year, with more than 1,000 employees across Australia. Goodman Fielder is in turn owned by Singapore-based Wilmar International, which ranks 192nd on the Forbes Global 500 list, after an annual revenue increase of 30 percent to \$US65.79 billion.

But the UWU leadership is working to ensure this dispute goes no further than Footscray. At all of Goodman Fielder's other locations, production is continuing as normal, with most workers kept in the dark about the Pampas strike.

Workers at the company's other facilities have told WSWS reporters they face similar conditions, including low pay and precarious employment.

A casual worker who spoke to the WSWS outside the company's Clayton South facility said: "Casuals don't know if we have a shift the next day. Often we're called into work that very morning, and sometimes they say 'go home' after only four hours."

She said as a labour-hire worker she was sometimes required to work two shifts in a single day at different facilities in completely different parts of Melbourne.

In Moorebank, New South Wales a worker who has been at Goodman Fielder for 15 years, including five as

a casual, told the WSWS the last three enterprise agreements—brokered by the UWU—had cut real wages.

A UWU delegate who works in dispatch at Clayton South said that in negotiations for the previous enterprise agreement, workers had demanded a 5 percent pay rise but the union had struck a deal—one hour before workers were due to strike—for between 3 and 3.5 percent.

He explained that the wraps being produced by a skeleton crew of casuals at Pampas were distributed from Clayton South. He said he thought workers at his facility should refuse to handle the Pampas product in solidarity with the striking workers.

Conscious of such sentiments among workers, but determined to contain the strike, the UWU has engaged in a series of stunts designed to present a veneer of “solidarity.”

This has included flag-waving exercises outside Zambrero franchises, a Canberra-based Mexican fast-food chain that buys tortillas from Pampas. This campaign is not aimed at mobilising exploited restaurant workers to fight alongside the striking Pampas employees, but is instead an appeal to Zambrero management to politely persuade Goodman Fielder CEO Gurpreet Vohra to accept the workers’ demands.

A similar campaign was directed at Baker’s Delight, another Pampas customer. But these companies have the same profit interest in maintaining low wages at their suppliers as Pampas itself does.

On December 8, Labor’s state member of parliament for Footscray Katie Hall and member-elect for Point Cook Mathew Hilakari were welcomed to the strike by UWU officials.

This should serve as a warning for the Pampas workers that a sell-out is on the way.

In betrayals engineered by the UWU in recent years, at Coles Smeaton Grange, McCormick Foods and General Mills, the presence of Labor Party representatives at the strike has been quickly followed by major concessions from the union leadership.

The UWU is attempting to defuse the dispute by promoting illusions in the Labor Party, which is spearheading a major offensive on wages and social spending.

With the full support of the unions, the federal Labor government has introduced new industrial relations

legislation that will further eviscerate the rights of workers to oppose a deepening assault on their wages and conditions.

Both the federal Labor government and the unions have been vigorously touting the laws as the basis of real wage rises. In fact, the laws will only further entrench the position of the unions, backed up by the industrial courts, as the chief mechanism of wage suppression, a role they have played for decades.

To fight this attack, workers at Pampas and throughout the working class need to take matters into their own hands. Real wage increases and decent working conditions cannot be fought for from within the straitjacket of the union bureaucracy.

Instead, workers must form their own organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves. Through these committees, Pampas workers can link up with their counterparts elsewhere in Goodman Fielder, the food manufacturing industry and throughout the working class, in Australia and globally.

This will require not just a fight for wages and working conditions, but a political struggle against all representatives of capitalism, including Labor, the industrial courts and the draconian anti-strike laws they enforce, and the trade union apparatus.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact