

Australia: Union herds Pampas pastry workers back on the job after wage-slashing company offer

Martin Scott

16 December 2022

Late Friday night, the United Workers' Union (UWU) announced on Facebook that workers at the Pampas pastry factory in Melbourne would return to work after four weeks on strike.

The UWU claims workers voted to end the strike after the company proposed a revised two-year enterprise agreement containing a 4.5 percent per annum pay “rise,” far short of the official inflation rate of 7.3 percent, or even the meagre 6 percent claim advanced by the union.

Pampas has reportedly agreed to offer permanent full-time jobs to eleven workers currently engaged as casuals through a third-party labour-hire arrangement, as well as direct employment for three others. Under the proposed new agreement the company will continue to use agency casuals, but will offer them direct employment after six months and permanency after one year. This will do nothing to prevent management from bringing workers on under precarious conditions to meet surges in demand and replacing them before the time limit is reached.

Pampas workers should be warned that the sparse “highlights” of the proposed deal presented by the UWU cannot be taken at face value. Until and unless workers have the opportunity to study it in full, the union-management agreement should be viewed with the utmost skepticism.

Even if everything the union bureaucracy claims is true, the new full-time jobs created by this deal are poorly paid ones with built-in sub-inflationary pay “rises.”

The UWU is asking workers, who earn an average of just \$27.61 per hour, to accept a real wage cut in order to foot the bill for minor revisions to an exploitative

labour-hire arrangement that is the product of successive enterprise agreements negotiated and enforced by the UWU and its predecessors.

The proposed agreement is not a “historic win” as the UWU claims, but a betrayal engineered by the union bureaucracy, which has isolated the striking workers and starved them out with woefully inadequate strike pay. This was designed to demoralise and wear down workers until they were prepared to accept whatever minor concessions the company was prepared to offer.

This operation is far from complete. An informal vote to end the strike does not mean workers must accept the offer on the table. By presenting the deal as a fait accompli, the UWU bureaucracy is seeking to steamroll the agreement through and short-circuit the approval process. The Socialist Equality Party urges Pampas workers to vote “no” to this sell-out deal when it is put to a formal ballot.

The return to work does not need to be the end of the struggle. But this means control must be wrested from the hands of the UWU bureaucracy. Last night’s announcement poses as a matter of the utmost urgency the need for Pampas workers to build a fighting organisation of their own.

It is only through the construction of a rank-and-file committee, run by workers themselves and completely independent of the union, that Pampas workers can take matters into their own hands.

As a first step, this committee must democratically formulate a set of demands based on the needs of workers, not what the union officials or management say is affordable. These should include an immediate pay rise, well above the current rate of inflation, to make up for past losses, and regular cost of living

increases to prevent workers falling behind as prices continue to rise. The use of lower-paid agency casuals should be abolished entirely and permanent jobs offered immediately to all casual workers.

The fight for these demands will require a turn to broader sections of workers, including but not limited to more than one thousand employed by Goodman Fielder, which owns Pampas, in factories across the country. Pampas workers should also reach out to their counterparts throughout the food manufacturing and distribution sector, many of whom, including at General Mills, McCormick Foods, Coles and Woolworths, have firsthand experience of betrayals by the UWU bureaucracy.

Just in the past week, the UWU has shut down struggles by workers who had voted to strike at Woolworths warehouses in Sydney and Melbourne, on the basis of pay offers far below the rate of inflation.

The sell-out in progress at Pampas followed a template established in a filthy legacy of betrayals by the UWU bureaucracy since the “super union” was formed in 2019.

At Coles’ Smeaton Grange warehouse in southwest Sydney, workers were locked out for 14 weeks before they finally accepted a union-management agreement that they had already rejected a dozen times. It was only the UWU bureaucracy’s campaign of isolation and starvation—the union refused to provide strike pay despite its immense resources—that forced the workers to relent and narrowly approve a deal that resolved none of their issues.

Workers at the General Mills factory in Rooty Hill, in Western Sydney, struck for three weeks, again with no strike pay, before accepting a deal that fell short of the UWU’s own meagre 3 percent per annum wage demand and did nothing to address their concerns over job security and casualisation.

In both disputes, the UWU bureaucracy, which claims to represent more than 150,000 workers, ensured the strikers were completely isolated from the broader working class, just as it has done at Pampas, where a few dozen workers were left alone to fight a battle that ultimately saw them pitted against Goodman Fielder’s owner, Wilmar International, a global corporation with annual revenue of US\$65.79 billion.

The Pampas dispute is part of the same process that has prompted more than 160,000 Australian workers,

from almost every industry, to strike over the past 12 months. Tens of thousands more have voted for action but been shut down by the union bureaucracy.

These workers will provide a strong foundation upon which to build a unified struggle for decent wages and conditions for all workers. This appeal should be from the standpoint that real wage cuts at Pampas affect the entire working class.

Every rotten sell-out deal rammed through by the union bureaucracy paves the way for still sharper attacks in the next, amid an assault on working-class jobs, pay and conditions that is only intensifying.

The dispute in Footscray is part of a global offensive. In Australia, this is being spearheaded by the federal Labor government. In October, the government handed down a budget containing the sharpest cuts to workers’ living standards since World War II. The Labor government, having declared its opposition to “across-the-board” wage growth, has now passed new industrial relations legislation to strengthen Australia’s already draconian anti-strike laws in order to contain workers’ opposition to the destruction of their jobs, wages and conditions. The unions enthusiastically backed this bill every step of the way.

What workers at Pampas and elsewhere are up against is not just the corporations, but the union apparatus and the Labor government, which are stepping up the role they have played for decades as the chief agents of the subordination of the working class to the profit demands of big business.

The fight for decent wages and conditions is impossible without a political struggle against Labor, the unions and the capitalist system they represent and defend. This ultimately means a fight to establish workers’ governments to implement a socialist program, including placing major corporations and banks under public ownership and democratic workers’ control.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact