

# Australia: Pampas workers rushed back to work after wage-cutting offer

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After four weeks on strike, workers returned to work at the Pampas pastry factory in Melbourne on Monday. The industrial action ended on Friday evening, after the United Workers Union (UWU) called an informal vote, which, workers have told the *World Socialist Web Site*, involved only around two-thirds of the striking workforce.

“The vote on Friday was rushed. The way the deal was rushed through to get the 4.5 percent, we pretty much feel that the union didn’t want to ask us properly if we should continue striking or if we should just settle,” a worker said.

Highlighting the anti-democratic manner in which the strike was wrapped up, workers who were not on site at the time were simply notified by text message that the strike had ended and that they should report to work as usual on Monday.

The snap vote was held on the basis of assurances from the UWU bureaucracy that the company had upped its pay “rise” offer from 4 percent to 4.5 percent and agreed to offer permanent full-time positions to workers currently engaged as casuals, either directly or through third-party labour hire contractors.

The UWU hailed this as a “historic win” even though the 4.5 percent figure represents a substantial pay cut in real terms, falling far short of the meagre 6 percent claim advanced by the union or workers’ initial demand for 8 percent. The official inflation rate in Australia is 7.3 percent, but this is a major understatement of the real increase in the cost of living, with the cost of basic essentials like fruit and vegetables rising by 16.2 percent in the 12 months to September, and interest rates skyrocketing.

The WSWs understands that workers have not seen the proposed agreement in writing and that a formal ballot to accept the offer will not be held until early

next year. Despite this, management and the union are proceeding as if the deal is complete and passed in an attempt to shut down discussion before an agreement has even been seen, let alone voted on by workers. The aim of the union leaders and management is to clear the way for it to be approved.

Workers should take this as a warning—until they are given the opportunity to study the fine print, none of the union bureaucracy’s claims about the contents of the proposed agreement should be taken at face value.

Even on the basis of what the UWU has put forward, this deal is a sell-out. Workers should not have to take a wage cut in exchange for nominally “secure” jobs.

The Socialist Equality Party urges Pampas workers to recognise that their struggle does not have to end in betrayal. As a first step, workers must vote “no” on the official ballot to prevent the union-engineered sell-out. But to take forward a fight for real improvements to wages and conditions they will need to take matters into their own hands.

The experiences of the past four weeks are a lesson to Pampas workers that such a struggle cannot be waged within the framework of the union apparatus, which serves as an industrial police force to impose the cost-cutting demands of management.

Instead, workers must form a new organisation of struggle, a rank-and-file committee independent of the union bureaucracy. Through this committee, Pampas workers can break the isolation enforced by the UWU and link up with the millions of workers here and around the world who are entering into struggle in opposition to similar attacks on wages, jobs and conditions.

The UWU bureaucracy kept the striking workers isolated from the broader working class, preventing any broader mobilisation of workers, including those at

other facilities owned by Goodman Fielder, which owns Pampas.

Workers have been told that casuals will be made permanent immediately, ahead of a formal vote on the agreement. A worker told the WSWS: “They’re rushing to get all of the casuals that were put on the list that the union gave to management converted almost immediately, before they shut down on Friday.”

The purpose is clear—the UWU bureaucracy and management are working in close collaboration to put workers under immense pressure to approve the agreement, for fear that a “no” vote could see these permanent full-time jobs torn away from themselves or their co-workers.

The question of job security was a critical issue for workers in the strike. Some workers at the plant have been engaged as labour-hire casuals for more than a decade, working in the same role without guaranteed hours, paid leave or other entitlements. These dire conditions are the product of sell-out enterprise agreements brokered by the UWU and its predecessors over decades.

Officially, Australia’s unemployment rate is 3.4 percent, the lowest in almost five decades. While this is a vast understatement of the number of workers out of work or underemployed, it does reflect that the labour market is unusually tight. Under these conditions, offering a handful of casual workers permanent positions with built-in sub-inflationary pay rises on top of already low wages is hardly a major concession by the company.

The UWU bureaucracy began preparing the sell-out well before Pampas workers walked off the job on November 21. In the months before the strike, workers had called for an 8 percent pay rise in line with inflation, but as negotiations wore on, through meeting after meeting, doubts began to emerge among some workers.

Union organisers fostered workers’ pessimism with warnings of the predictably nasty tactics the company would employ in the event of a strike, and when a worker suggested revising the demand to 6 percent, they seized upon it, quickly calling a vote on that figure.

Throughout most of the strike, delivery trucks were allowed to cross the picket line, meaning production could continue, at least to the limited extent possible

with the reduced numbers of workers still inside. Union organisers told workers that if they blocked the trucks they would run the risk of being arrested by police.

The draconian laws that would be used against workers in such a manner are contained in the Fair Work Act, introduced by the Rudd-Gillard Labor government in 2008 with the full backing of the unions, which have defended and enforced the anti-strike legislation ever since.

The current Labor government, again with the full support of the unions, has introduced new legislation to further erode the rights of workers to oppose attacks on their jobs, pay and conditions.

In taking forward their fight, what Pampas workers confront is not merely a wage dispute, but a political struggle against Labor, the industrial courts and the unions, which are spearheading the assault on the working class, as they have done for decades, in line with the profit demands of big business.



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