

Australia: Victorian Socialists cover for union sell-out at Pampas

Martin Scott

23 December 2022

More than 50 workers at the Pampas pastry factory in Melbourne returned to work on Monday after four weeks on strike. The United Workers' Union (UWU) bureaucracy is attempting to ram through a deal that will slash real wages.

The UWU declared a "historic win," although the revised company offer of a 4.5 percent per annum pay rise represents a significant cut to real wages and falls far short of either the union's claim of 6 percent or workers' initial demand for 8 percent. A handful of casual workers, either directly employed or engaged through labour-hire contractors, have been promised permanent full-time jobs under the deal, but the full details of the agreement are being kept tightly under wraps.

Betrayals such as the one underway at Pampas would not be possible without the assistance of Socialist Alternative and its electoral front, Victorian Socialists, as well as Solidarity and other pseudo-left tendencies. These organisations posture as "socialist" in order to tap into seething working-class discontent and distrust of the pro-business parliamentary parties.

But they serve as boosters and apologists for the union apparatus, to which they are closely tied. To the extent that they serve up any criticism at all of the unions, it is to paint sell-outs as the product of minor tactical errors, workers' lack of militancy, or "weakness" of the union stemming from low membership numbers. The purpose is to tie workers to the official union structures, despite their role as policemen for the companies and capitalist governments against the interests of the working class.

At the time of writing, almost a week after the strike was ended, none of Australia's pseudo-left publications have reported on the Pampas sell-out. Within hours of the UWU's announcement that the strike was over, however, prominent Victorian Socialists member Liz Walsh declared on social media, "One thing is clear - striking gets results!"

Walsh acknowledged the deal is "a pay cut in reality," but her message to workers was that they must wait until "the agreement expires in 18 months time." She has declared the clause allowing casuals to apply for permanency after 12 months a great win. The company, however, can simply sack the casuals before the 12 months is up.

Walsh noted "sadly 4.5 is above average for pay deals at the moment," without a word of criticism for the union bureaucracies that have enforced real wage cuts in one enterprise agreement after another.

Socialist Alternative's *Red Flag* published only a single article on the Pampas dispute while the strike was underway. The December 8 column lauded the action a "success" because "almost all" workers were taking part in the strike, as a result of "strong levels of unionisation in the factory." But the author made no attempt to explain why workers reported that "conditions have consistently become worse" over the past three decades, under the watchful eye of the "strong" union.

The article claimed "workers have committed to staying out for as long as it takes to win a better deal," despite noting matter of factly that the union's 6 percent pay demand "would represent a decline in real wages."

What are Pampas workers expected to take from this? Like the union

bureaucracy, *Red Flag* was telling workers that, no matter how determined their fight, a real wage cut is inevitable.

The article did not mention that, despite its immense resources, the UWU gave workers less than half their regular wage in strike pay, as a means of starving workers out and engineering a premature return to work. In this context, the reference to "staying out for as long as it takes" served only as a reminder to workers of the crippling financial pressure to accept a rotten deal.

The purpose of this was to demoralise the striking workers in preparation for a union-engineered sell-out and to shield the bureaucracy from criticism once the reality of the betrayal became clear.

Red Flag, moreover, was asserting that the union strike would continue indefinitely, at the very point where the union was seeking to bring the stoppage to a conclusion. All of this was directed against the development of an independent movement of workers outside the control of the UWU, at Pampas or anywhere else.

Solidarity also published a lone article on the dispute. Their only criticism of the UWU campaign was over "stunts outside Zambrero stores" where the union campaigned with a petition imploring the Goodman Fielder CEO to give "workers a fair deal." Solidarity disagreed with these actions, not because they were appealing to the fast-food chain's CEO rather than its workers, but because they were a distraction from the struggle at Pampas itself.

Solidarity declared, "bringing out the warehouse members and organising a hard picket at the gates is what's needed to bring the company to heel." In other words, under a veneer of militancy, the pseudo-left organisation was insisting that the dispute must be kept within the narrow confines of the Footscray factory.

What Solidarity does not discuss is that such action by workers in a relatively small factory would open them up to the provisions of anti-strike laws including fines, deregistration and possibly jail terms. These laws have been legislated nationally and in every state, predominantly by Labor governments, with the full collaboration and agreement of the union bureaucracies.

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 in the year to 2021.

For Pampas workers to take on an international conglomerate they require the support of all workers at Goodman Fielder in Australia and internationally. That is not a prospect that the union leadership would allow. Not one other Goodman Fielder factory was called on to strike in support of their co-workers in the Footscray plant.

Solidarity, with its exclusive focus on the prospect of "militant" actions confined to the one plant, gave a "left" gloss to this campaign of isolation. At the same time, it said nothing about the UWU's own support for the

anti-strike legislation, in a clear attempt to prevent workers from recognising that a fight against the draconian industrial relations framework requires a struggle against the union leadership.

The pseudo-left's position in every dispute essentially amounts to the conception that all that is required is a more militant struggle within the framework of the unions. The bankruptcy of this perspective is sharply expressed in past betrayals, including at Coles Smeaton Grange.

At the distribution centre in southwest Sydney, 350 workers were locked out by management in November 2020 as part of an enterprise agreement dispute. For 14 weeks, workers refused to accept a sell-out deal, as the UWU forced workers to vote more than ten times on virtually unchanged company offers that would do nothing to address workers' concerns over wages and the imminent closure of the warehouse.

The UWU leadership kept the workers cut off from the rest of the working class, including their counterparts at other Coles warehouses, and hung them out to dry with no strike pay. Ultimately, this campaign of isolation and starvation wore workers down and the union-management agreement was accepted by a narrow margin.

The pseudo-left played a key auxiliary role in this sell-out.

Red Flag offered only minor criticisms, ascribing the defeat to timidity on the part of union officials and the failure of workers who opposed the deal to "act decisively." According to *Red Flag*, the lesson for workers from Smeaton Grange was that "to win they need active strikes, and they need to be ready to go beyond the union officials."

Throughout the dispute, Solidarity opposed calls for the establishment of independent rank-and-file committees and insisted that workers must remain within the framework of the union.

Solidarity hailed the efforts of a small group of UWU delegates who took control of the "no" vote campaign. While posturing as a rank-and-file organisation, they continued to run the dispute on behalf of the union bureaucracy. The purpose of this group was not to challenge the union leadership but to serve as a safety valve to prevent the development of truly independent organisations of struggle.

The pseudo-left hid this in order to promote illusions among workers that, despite what their own bitter experience tells them, the unions can be reformed from within. The Smeaton Grange dispute exposed this as a fraud. The more workers moved to the left and placed pressure on the union leadership, the more openly the UWU collaborated with management to ensure the deal went through. In turn, the UWU delegates promoted by Solidarity enforced the dictates of the union leadership against workers.

This is because sell-outs are not, as the pseudo-left claims, the product of individual bad leaders, tactical errors or a lack of militancy, but of the class role of the union apparatus as an appendage of big business and finance capitalism. The unions are tasked with imposing the cost-cutting demands of management and shutting down workers' opposition to continual attacks on their jobs, pay and conditions.

These are no longer workers' organisations in any shape or form. In an earlier period, the unions, which always defended capitalism, were nevertheless capable of extracting minor concessions from employers and governments within a tightly regulated national economy. But with the globalisation of production, beginning in the 1980s, the unions have become the chief enforcers of wage-slashing corporate restructuring operations aimed at ensuring the "international competitiveness" of "Australian" businesses.

The pseudo-left are keenly aware that working-class support for Labor and the unions is at an all-time low, with both in an unprecedented crisis. Speaking for a layer of the affluent upper middle-class, centred in academia, the top echelons of the public sector and the union bureaucracy itself, the pseudo-left is seeking to step into the breach and shore up the faltering political establishment.

This is the basis for the orientation of Victorian Socialists to reformist

parliamentary politics, sharply expressed in its standing of 38 candidates in last month's Victorian state election. The campaign was directed at winning seats in the state parliament as a means of defending Premier Daniel Andrews and the Labor government, which, while being reelected, did so with a sharp decline in support in the working class suburbs of Melbourne and regional areas. This followed the same tendency in recent federal elections, in which the Labor Party's working-class vote has declined to historic levels.

The entire thrust of the Victorian Socialists campaign was to peddle the fraud that workers' interests could be advanced through the state parliament, even though it is a vehicle for the corporations and the banks. A Victorian Socialists member of parliament, they claimed, would place pressure on Labor, which would in turn be compelled to institute limited reforms. Entirely absent from this fairytale schema was the deepening crisis of capitalism or the austerity offensive of governments everywhere, including those led by the big-business Labor Party.

Just as they seek to trap workers within the framework of the decaying parliamentary order through such campaigns, the Victorian Socialists and the pseudo-left seek to block any struggle of workers outside the control of the union leaderships. The aim in both cases is to prevent the development of an independent political movement of the working class.

This is why the pseudo-left are given the same warm reception by union officials at strikes as are representatives of the Labor Party. It also explains the hysterical response of union organisers to the presence of Socialist Equality Party members, who expose the fetid history of the union apparatus and call for the establishment of independent rank-and-file committees as the basis of a struggle, not just over immediate workplace issues but against Labor, the unions, the industrial courts and all other defenders of the capitalist system.

This is the perspective that Pampas workers must adopt if they are to reject the UWU sell-out and take forward their fight for a genuine pay rise and permanent jobs for all workers at the factory. They will need to take matters into their own hands and form a rank-and-file committee, independent of the union, to democratically plan and execute a struggle for demands based on the actual needs of workers.

Pampas workers will find support for this fight through a turn to the growing sections of workers throughout Australia and around the world who are entering into struggle against similar attacks on their jobs, wages and conditions. But this will require exactly what Victorian Socialists and other pseudo-left organisations are desperately trying to prevent—workers breaking free from the stranglehold imposed by the union apparatus.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact