

Australia: Pampas workers, vote “no” to union sell-out! Form a rank-and-file committee to fight for wages and jobs!

Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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The Socialist Equality Party urges Pampas pastry factory workers to vote “no” to the proposed wage-slashing enterprise agreement being pushed by the United Workers’ Union (UWU) bureaucracy in the ballot scheduled for January 10.

Under the deal, workers will receive a meagre 4.5 percent per annum pay rise, far below the current inflation rate of 7.3 percent. Despite this significant cut to real wages, the UWU is heralding the proposed agreement as a victory on the basis of management’s pledge to offer full-time jobs to a handful of workers engaged as labour-hire casuals.

This is a sell-out. Workers should not have to accept a cut to real wages in exchange for the promise of job security.

The UWU bureaucracy is working hand-in-hand with management to ram through the agreement using anti-democratic methods. Since ending the four-week strike based on a show of hands involving only a fraction of the workforce, the union leadership has presented the deal as a *fait accompli* and maintained a veil of secrecy around the agreement itself.

Many workers at the plant have not received copies of the proposed agreement. This includes full-time staff who will soon be asked to vote, as well as labour-hire casuals who have been promised full-time jobs.

The issue of direct employment has been central to the dispute and many of these casual workers took part in the strike. The UWU bureaucracy claims the deal is a “historic win” for these workers. So why are they being kept in the dark? What details are contained in the proposed agreement that management and the union apparatus do not want workers to see?

Every worker at Pampas should demand the right to closely examine the proposed agreement, which will determine their wages and working conditions for at least the next two years. There should be a mass meeting of all workers at the factory, to allow broad and open discussion of the offer in advance of any vote.

These basic democratic processes are impossible within the framework of the union. Throughout this dispute, the UWU bureaucracy has sought to suppress any genuine struggle to defend wages and jobs. Now, conscious that there is opposition

to the deal, the union is hiding the agreement and blocking discussion to prevent the emergence of any unified opposition.

This poses the urgent need for Pampas workers to take matters into their own hands, ahead of the January 10 ballot. Those workers who have received the agreement should ensure that copies are circulated throughout the factory, so that it can be studied and discussed openly.

A means has to be established for workers to discuss and thrash out a set of demands for what they need, not what management says it can afford, and prepare a plan to fight for them. That is why the SEP advocates the formation of a rank-and-file committee. Such a committee is not to pressure the union to fight, which it will never do, but has to be a body independent of the union and democratically controlled by workers.

Workers need to understand what they face in any fight. They are not just up against company management, but Labor and the state apparatus, including the pro-business Fair Work Commission, which works in close collaboration with the unions to shut down workers’ opposition to an ever-deepening assault on the working class.

Pampas is just a tiny part of a giant multinational corporation. Wilmar International, which owns Goodman Fielder and Pampas, controls more than 500 factories worldwide, predominantly in Asia and the Pacific, and recorded \$65 billion in revenue in 2021.

The UWU has promoted the promise of “job security” under the proposed agreement, but this is entirely illusory. The directors of Goodman Fielder and Wilmar International will not hesitate to slash jobs or close the Pampas factory entirely, if that will increase profits. Since Wilmar International took over Goodman Fielder in 2015, its workforce has declined from 5,500 workers in 2014 to 3,325 in 2021.

A few dozen pastry workers cannot battle alone against a huge multinational corporation, but that certainly does not mean the task is impossible.

Wilmar International’s massive wealth depends on the labour of 100,000 workers, who also face spiralling inflation and declining real wages. Within the company itself there is a broad

base of workers upon which to build a unified struggle for real improvements to wages and conditions.

Globally, millions of workers are entering the class struggle as wages fall, prices soar and everyday life becomes increasingly intolerable, even impossible. Australia is no exception, with industrial action reaching levels not seen in more than a decade.

Through a rank-and-file committee, Pampas workers can seek out, talk to and link up with other sections of workers in Goodman Fielder and other companies in Australia and internationally to develop a unified fight for improved wages and conditions. That is absolutely impossible within the framework of the trade union apparatus, which divides workers, factory by factory and country by country.

The UWU bureaucracy ran the Pampas strike as a deliberate exercise in isolation and demoralisation. By cutting the strikers off from the broader working class and providing a pitiful excuse for strike pay, the union bureaucracy sought to wear down workers' resolve and convince them that their demands were unachievable. This was not just designed to ram through this enterprise agreement, but to discourage workers from opposing future management attacks.

The UWU has employed the same methods to sell out workers in several key disputes in recent years. This includes Coles' Smeaton Grange warehouse, where 350 workers were locked out by the company for more than three months in 2020–2021. The union provided no strike pay to workers, while keeping the dispute isolated to ensure that the company's operations and profits were unaffected. The union forced workers to vote again and again on a union-management offer that was virtually unchanged. With workers under immense financial pressure and seeing no way forward, a narrow majority finally succumbed and the union bureaucracy was able to force through a deal that met none of workers' demands.

This betrayal, like the one in progress at Pampas, did not result from tactical errors, a lack of determination on the part of workers, bad individuals in the union leadership, or anything unique to the UWU. The union apparatus as a whole functions as an industrial police force for management and government, to impose and enforce the demands of the corporate elite for ever-greater extraction of profits from labour.

The union bureaucracies have a direct material stake in imposing this agenda. Their substantial privileges depend on forcing through the demands of big business. The UWU's office holders received total compensation of more than \$4 million in 2020–2021. National Secretary Tim Kennedy was paid a salary of \$230,354, more than four times that of an average Pampas worker, plus benefits of almost \$58,000.

In the struggle for improved wages and conditions, workers are not only up against their employer and the union, but the whole apparatus of the capitalist state.

In Australia, the answer of Labor governments at the state and federal level to soaring living costs resulting from the

worsening global crisis of capitalism is to deepen the assault on the working class through real wage cuts and the slashing of social spending.

Fully aware that this agenda will lead to rising opposition from workers, the federal Labor government rushed new industrial relations legislation through parliament last month, introducing even harsher anti-strike laws than the already draconian provisions introduced by previous Labor governments.

The union bureaucracies have backed these regressive industrial laws as they rely on them in order to block workers' demands for broad industrial action. The union apparatus is equally on board with Labor's austerity agenda and closely connected to the party itself. This includes the UWU, which in 2020–2021 gave the Labor Party almost \$1.2 million in affiliation fees, donations and other payments, according to the Australian Electoral Commission.

While masses of people worldwide are being driven into poverty and starvation by skyrocketing food prices, companies like Wilmar reap record profits. Under capitalism, the private ownership of the means of production means not only the exploitation of the workforce, but the trampling on basic social rights, such as to put food on the table.

The struggle for decent wages and conditions at Pampas is inseparable from the fight for socialism and a workers' government. Essential industries, including food production, need to be placed under public ownership and democratic workers' control, and run to meet the needs of ordinary working people, not the profits of the wealthy elite.

This is an international fight that requires a global counteroffensive of the working class on the basis of a socialist program. A rank-and-file committee of Pampas workers can link up with workers around the world through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees established by the SEP and its sister parties that includes rail workers in the US, bus drivers in the UK, plantation workers in Sri Lanka, and health workers in Australia.

The Socialist Equality Party urges Pampas workers to reject the union-management sell-out agreement and form a rank-and-file committee as the first steps to joining this global fight. We pledge to provide every political assistance in this struggle, and encourage Pampas workers to contact us today.



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