

Details emerge of union sell-out at Pampas as voting begins

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Absentee voting has begun in the official ballot to approve a new enterprise agreement at the Pampas pastry factory in Melbourne. Online voting will be open until Tuesday January 17, when an in-person ballot will be held.

The Socialist Equality Party urges Pampas workers to vote “no” to this sell-out deal, which will slash real wages, reduce overtime payments for part-time workers and do nothing to resolve longstanding concerns over job security and other conditions for casual workers.

Documents seen by the *World Socialist Web Site* reveal the anti-democratic character of ballot being conducted.

Workers not on site for the in-person ballot, or who prefer to vote electronically, are required to send an email to a representative of management and a union organiser containing their full name and “yes” or “no” vote. This means workers who vote against the union-management deal via email are placing a target on their backs for future discrimination.

While the paper ballot will allow secret voting on January 17, it will still be run and counted by management and the union, who are both determined to push the agreement through.

This underscores the need for Pampas workers to establish a rank-and-file committee to wrest control of this dispute from the hands of the UWU bureaucracy. As a first order of business, this committee should demand the right for rank-and-file workers to supervise the count.

The anti-democratic ballot follows a joint union-management campaign of suppression and secrecy around the proposed agreement itself. While the company claims that all workers were sent a copy on December 22, the vast majority of workers spoken to by the WSWs did not receive it.

A copy of the proposed agreement was placed in the lunchroom yesterday, in compliance with the bare minimum requirements of the Fair Work Act that workers

must have “access” to the document for seven days prior to the vote.

In other words, Goodman Fielder, with the full support of the UWU bureaucracy, has done everything legally possible to hide the details of the deal from workers.

A close examination of the proposed agreement reveals that it contains changes that workers were told nothing about. Other clauses promoted by the union leadership as a “historic win” reveal the claim to be a fraud.

Firstly, the agreement entrenches a substantial cut in real wages over the next two years. The nominal annual wage rise of 4.5 percent is far below the current rate of inflation, 7.3 percent, but the cost of basic items is rising even more quickly. Fruit and vegetables increased in price by 16.2 percent in the year to September.

Workers originally demanded an 8 percent pay rise, but were persuaded by UWU organisers to lower their claim to 6 percent. Now, the bureaucracy is telling them to vote in favour of 4.5 percent!

The provision celebrated by the UWU bureaucracy, and used as the pretext for ending the four-week strike on December 16, is a requirement for the company to offer permanent jobs to workers currently engaged as casuals through a third-party labour hire company. This is a major issue at the Pampas plant, where some workers have been employed on these precarious conditions for up to two decades.

Under the proposed agreement, a labour-hire worker who has been “employed on a regular and systematic basis” for 12 months will be offered direct employment as a casual. Only after a further six months as a casual will workers be eligible to apply in writing to be made a permanent employee. Whether this permanent job is full- or part-time will depend on how many hours per week the worker was regularly rostered for as a casual.

While the UWU did note the lengthy time frame in its Facebook post announcing the end of the strike, it has not

been clearly explained to workers. And union officials have done nothing to clarify widespread misconceptions among the workforce.

The agreement contains the condition that the company agrees not to “dismiss any casual employee in order to avoid the rights of those employees under this clause.” But in practice this will not protect workers who, in their 18 months of casual employment, can be sacked at any time without notice.

Contrary to the UWU bureaucracy’s claim of a “historic win,” the agreement places no limit on the number of positions that can be filled by labour-hire casuals. This means that, even with the new conversion measures, new employees engaged through labour hire will not enjoy the minimum rights added to the National Employment Standards in 2021, which require employers to offer permanent jobs to casuals after 12 months.

The reality is that none of these measures will guarantee “job security” for workers at the plant, labour-hire, casual or otherwise. Pampas is just a tiny component of a vast multinational corporation, Wilmar International, which can just close down or sell off the entire factory at any time in line with its corporate plans and profit interests.

As was the case in the previous enterprise agreement, overtime pay for casuals will continue to be based on the ordinary hourly rate, excluding the 25 percent casual loading. This is a direct result of the union bureaucracy trading off a basic provision of the industrial award.

One aspect of the proposed agreement that the UWU has kept completely under wraps is the introduction of “flex up” provisions. These will create the conditions for part-time employees to work more than their rostered hours without overtime pay, unless it results in a shift of more than ten hours.

While this is supposedly “at the employee’s request,” the financial pressure of low wages, declining further in real terms under this deal, and the fact that it is only possible “where flex up hours are available,” means that this arrangement will operate entirely at management’s discretion.

The proposed agreement contains a new section headed “UNION CLAUSES.” This contains measures that are commonly inserted in enterprise agreements to firmly entrench the union within the workplace so that it can function more effectively as an enforcement arm of management.

The key items are the incorporation of union officials into the induction process, giving the UWU the opportunity to press workers to join the union when they

first start at Pampas. Related to this is the “obligation” for the company to deduct union dues from workers’ wages, unless they refuse to sign up during the induction.

The addition of this section to the agreement is a token of the company’s appreciation for the UWU’s handling of the dispute, ending the strike despite substantial hostility among workers to the slashing of real wages. It highlights that management and the union bureaucracy are working hand-in-glove to impose this rotten agreement.

Pampas workers should reject this deal as the first step in a fight for real improvements in wages and conditions. This cannot be advanced within the stranglehold of the union bureaucracy, which is tied by a thousand threads to management and finance capital more broadly.

Workers need to form their own fighting organisation, an independent rank-and-file committee democratically controlled by workers, to develop a set of demands based on the actual needs of workers and a plan to fight for them.

This struggle will bring workers into conflict, not just with management, but with the union bureaucracy, as well as Labor, the industrial courts and all other defenders of the capitalist profit system.

To defeat this multi-headed opponent, Pampas workers will need to reach out to the growing numbers of workers throughout Australia and around the world, including at other Goodman Fielder facilities, who are entering the class struggle in opposition to similar attacks on real wages and conditions, amid the rapidly rising cost of living.

This is an international fight that requires a global counteroffensive of the working class on the basis of a socialist program. 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.

The SEP will provide every political assistance in this struggle. We urge Pampas and other workers to contact us today to discuss the situation you confront and the fight to build rank-and-file committees.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact