

Australia: Pampas workers call on colleagues to vote “no” to union sell-out

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Around 80 permanent food manufacturing workers at the Pampas plant in Footscray, Melbourne vote Tuesday on a proposed agreement negotiated by company management and United Workers Union (UWU) officials.

The union leadership ended a four-week strike on December 16, declaring a “historic win.”

In fact, the deal involves a nominal 4.5 percent wage rise, i.e., a significant wage cut compared with inflation, and clauses related to permanent jobs for casual workers that still leave the door open for the widespread exploitation of labour-hire workers.

Sentiment is building within the facility for a “no” vote, and there has been widespread discussion among workers on the analysis published on the *World Socialist Web Site*, including the Socialist Equality Party’s statement “Pampas workers, vote ‘no’ to union sell-out! Form a rank-and-file committee to fight for wages and jobs!”

Several workers at Pampas and other plants in Melbourne operated by Goodman Fielder, which owns Pampas, recently spoke with the WSWS. Their names and other potentially identifying information are withheld to protect them from victimisation.

One veteran Pampas worker spoke with the WSWS about the reaction to the strike and attempted sell out. “What we wanted, the company refused to give us,” she explained.

“I’m not happy with the union because it rushed to end the strike—we should have had a bottom line and it should have been more than 4.5 percent. When the vote was taken at the picket line to accept the offer and end the strike, the company manager and HR [human resources executive] were there watching. I believe that some workers felt intimidated to vote for ending the strike.”

The worker continued: “Now the company is saying it’s all a return to normal, welcome back, let’s all pull together as one, blah, blah, blah. I’m not happy with all that, it’s disgusting—they should pay us properly.”

She discussed the growing hostility within Pampas toward the UWU bureaucracy. “A lot of people are going to leave the union. I know that already a couple of people have, and I

think I will too before the end of the year. One lady was telling me that she asked a union official—‘First we asked for 8 percent, then no less than 6 percent, so why end up with 4.5 percent?’ He just glared at her, gave no explanation.

“The union is not going to do anything for us, no-one’s going to help us. Some union officials have big mouths to talk with, but then nothing happens after we strike for four weeks. Nothing. Lots of people are now discussing that there is no point going on strike—we were out there for four weeks, without wages, and for what? Four and a half percent?

“I am going to vote ‘no.’ I don’t care anymore about the consequences of that—I’m not going to accept what they’re offering. Who knows what’s going to happen?”

Another worker discussed the necessity to organise collective action independently of, and in opposition to, the union bureaucracy that is trying to sell workers out.

Firstly, on the union-company deal, he said: “The agreement is terrible of course. Obviously in that the pay raise is very substandard, from an inflation point of view. There is some carrot and stick for casuals—if you work really hard, stick around for 18 months you may get the chance to be full time.

“This pathway to job security is so convoluted, so full of criteria and exceptions and so on that you will have to be very determined to be full time and stick it out for 18 months to become a full time. You may have to commit to not doing anything else, not studying, not having another job, just doing this for 18 months at least.”

The worker denounced the UWU for not making an appeal to the casual workers who were intimidated into continuing to work during the strike, and for not organising the picket to block truck movements, which allowed production to continue at reduced capacity during the strike.

He also explained the impact of the absence of proper strike pay during the dispute: “It was not until the second week that the union paid us strike money, which was just \$500. Clearly this wasn’t enough, at all, for many workers, especially those who have mortgages and kids. It was not enough at all, and there were plenty of people saying \$500

simply won't cut it.

"In total, they only paid us twice, the second and third week of the strike. This was a major factor in how the strike ended as it did—there were simply too many people saying that they can't live on just that money."

Asked what he thought about the Socialist Equality Party's call for the formation of a rank-and-file committee, he said, "Absolutely, I'm all for it, this is exactly what we need."

He explained: "Rank-and-file is basically talking about us workers, the average worker in the factory—that's how I understand rank-and-file, it's your everyday worker. When it comes to a rank-and-file committee, the way I understand it is that it's a committee or a council if you want to call it that, comprising of us average workers, all of us, so we get a say, a solid say, in what actually happens. And when there are union meetings, that's where the rank-and-file committee can speak up, confront the officials on matters that affect us, and which are unfair and undemocratic.

"We as a whole collective basically stand up to union officials when they're trying to impose things, pressuring people to agree to a certain thing. We come to meetings as a committee and say: 'Actually we've already voted, and these are our demands that you have accept. We've already discussed these things in our committee and we want these things to be voted on now.'

"That's how I understand committees, it's where workers take the initiative, so instead of it being the officials presenting to us the agendas and topics, instead of them directing the discussion, it's us. During the strike, I always felt that we were just responding to the officials, rather than presenting our demands to the officials. There was a top down approach, instead of a bottom up.

"The union is basically a business, without that name, that's how I understand it. Whereas a rank-and-file committee is a circle of workers, where we discuss and organise ourselves."

In order to take forward their fight, Pampas workers will need to reach out to broader sections of workers, many of whom confront similar attacks. This includes other Goodman Fielder factories, where there is already a growing base of support.

A worker at another Goodman Fielder plant said: "Obviously, I'm 100 percent with the Pampas workers. With this inflation that's happening, we all do need higher pay. Prices are getting high and Pampas workers are not getting paid well, and it is difficult for them to cope. So I'm definitely with them."

She added: "I'm a labour-hire casual, I've worked at lots of factories where they don't treat us well. They exploit workers with low pay, more work, and so many things. The

amount of work they were getting from us, oh my god, it was a lot, they wanted us to work like a machine."

The worker spoke about the insecurity of labour-hire work: "Sometimes I only get limited shifts, three days a week, I don't know why. Then other times I'm working like a crazy person, doing 12-hour shifts continuously for 6 days. I felt like I was dead by the end of that. Then sometimes after one shift ended at one factory, I did another at a different one. I don't do this any more, but I used to shift between three factories, sometimes working seven days a week.

"They used to call me any time they wanted. So many times they called me at 4 in the night, or morning—I say night because I am sleeping then, you know. They call me at 4, at 2 in the night, and ask if I can go to work. I feel like saying, 'Are you serious? If you want me to work, call me early, so I can organise my sleep during the day if I need to.'"

She added: "These companies function because of the workers. If all of us were not going to the factory and working there, who would then produce the bread? That is not acknowledged—the companies don't think about their workers."

Another worker at a Goodman Fielder plant in eastern Melbourne said he fully supported the Pampas workers' struggle, and was sharing WSWS articles via social media to several friends working in food production.

On transnational corporations and their subsidiaries, like Wilmar International and Goodman Fielder, the worker said: "It's like a pyramid—there's lots more to Goodman Fielder than people realise. They make millions of dollars of revenue worldwide. Big companies are taking people for a ride—they don't give a shit about their workers. More and more, people are just numbers to them."

On Pampas and the attempted UWU sell-out agreement, the worker stated: "The union isn't celebrating a win for the workers, they're celebrating that there'll be more money in their own pocket. They're celebrating their own bank account.

"I agree with what you said about unions isolating workers from each other and trying to limit any action to just one factory. To really achieve something, other workers need to show their support for Pampas workers. There has to be a wider effort."

We encourage Pampas workers to contact the SEP and develop the discussion on how to take forward the fight for real wage rises and job security.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact