

Australia: Vote “no” to union-enforced real wage cuts at Pampas! Form a rank-and-file committee to fight for jobs and pay!

Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
15 January 2023

The Socialist Equality Party urges workers at the Pampas pastry factory in Melbourne to vote “no” to the proposed union-management enterprise agreement in the formal ballot that closes tomorrow.

It is not enough to register a “no” vote, however. Without the organised opposition of workers, the United Workers’ Union (UWU) bureaucracy will call vote after vote on the proposed agreement to wear workers down and force through the deal. The UWU leadership has used this *modus operandi* before, including in its 2020–21 betrayal of workers at Coles Smeaton Grange.

To prevent a sell-out, Pampas workers will need to form their own democratic organisation of struggle, a rank-and-file committee. Whatever the outcome of the vote, it is only through this committee that they will be able to fight for real improvements to wages and conditions.

The proposed agreement, falsely promoted by the UWU as a “historic win,” would in fact slash wages in real terms. The nominal pay rise of 4.5 percent falls far short of the official inflation rate of 7.3 percent and the real cost of living is rising even more sharply for low-income workers, as the price of essential goods and services skyrockets.

If approved, the deal will further entrench the benchmark of real wage cuts for workers throughout food production, manufacturing and more broadly. By the same token, rejection of this union-management deal by Pampas workers would provide an impetus for workers elsewhere to fight for decent wages and conditions.

The UWU leadership used the financial pain Pampas workers are already feeling to shut down the strike on December 16, with workers’ demands unmet. Over the course of the four-week strike, the union gave workers just \$1,000 in “strike pay,” a fraction of their regular wage, placing them under immense pressure to return to work.

To help ram through the agreement, the union bureaucracy has weaponised the strong support for the rights of labour-hire casuals among directly employed workers at the plant.

Pampas workers should reject the phony premise that they must accept a wage cut in exchange for supposedly secure jobs for themselves or others in the plant.

Chief responsibility for the longstanding use of labour hire at the factory lies with the bureaucracy of the UWU and its predecessor, United Voice, which has ratified the practice in one enterprise agreement after another.

The contents of the agreement, which management and the union leadership sought to keep hidden for as long as possible, reveal that the rights of labour-hire workers to move to permanent full- or part-time jobs will be far more conditional and protracted than workers were led to believe.

Moreover, the reality is that the agreement is no guarantee of secure employment. Pampas is just a tiny component of Wilmar International, a vast multinational corporation, which will readily slash jobs or close the factory entirely if that becomes the most profitable option.

Workers also confront broader issues that the union bureaucracy has made plain it will do nothing to address. One is the continuing spread of COVID-19, as a consequence of the “let it rip” policies supported by Labor, the Liberals and the unions themselves. Factories are once again becoming a vector for the spread of the virus, which caused more than 400 deaths across the country last week, as profits are placed before health and lives.

Votes in tomorrow’s ballot will be jointly counted by representatives of management and the union officialdom, the two parties conspiring to ram this agreement through. This immediately poses the need for a rank-and-file committee to scrutinise the vote and defend the basic democratic rights of Pampas workers.

A rank-and-file committee could bring together workers from all sections of the plant, production and warehouse, permanent and casual, union and non-union, in a common struggle for real wage increases and secure jobs, directed by workers, not union officials.

Within union meetings, the committee can fight to ensure

that workers have a right to speak, make motions and call votes at union meetings, as well as demanding that the UWU use its huge financial resources to support workers' struggles, including by giving workers full strike pay.

But a rank-and-file committee is not a pressure group that aims to persuade the union bureaucracy to fight for the interests of workers. Such reform is impossible because, like all unions, the UWU is not a workers' organisation, but an industrial enforcement arm of management, tied by a thousand threads to finance capital and the capitalist state, run by bureaucrats earning four times what a Pampas worker does.

A rank-and-file committee will fight to seize the power from this anti-working class bureaucracy and put it back in the hands of ordinary workers on the factory floor.

In the first instance, this committee will need to democratically formulate a set of demands based on the needs and concerns of workers in the plant. As a starting point, the SEP suggests the following:

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- Voting on enterprise agreements or any other matter must be subject to the scrutiny of rank-and-file workers.
- An immediate 30-percent wage rise for all Pampas workers to account for current inflation and make up for past losses.
- All future pay rises linked to inflation, with a monthly cost-of-living adjustment to prevent workers from falling behind.
- No more labour hire at Pampas! All workers currently engaged under this exploitative arrangement must be offered permanent jobs, full- or part-time as wanted, effective immediately. Any worker who wishes to remain casual should be directly employed in this role and have the right to be properly consulted in advance on their shift times.
- Years of service at Pampas or other Goodman Fielder facilities as a labour-hire casual must be included in calculating entitlements such as long service leave.
- Mitigation measures against COVID-19 must be implemented, including proper ventilation and N95 masks for all workers. In the event of an outbreak in the factory, workers, not management must decide whether conditions are safe. Paid pandemic leave for any worker who is infected and full pay for all workers if a temporary shutdown is necessary.

In the fight for these demands, Pampas workers will not only come up against the management of Goodman Fielder and Wilmar International, but the whole capitalist apparatus, which is determined to impose the full cost of the escalating global economic crisis upon ordinary working people.

This includes the federal Labor government, which

opposes "across-the-board" wage growth and is carrying out sweeping cuts to social spending. In an effort to prevent a surge of opposition from workers to its austerity agenda, Labor has, with the complete support of the union bureaucracy, introduced new industrial relations legislation designed to tighten Australia's already draconian anti-strike laws.

It also includes the Reserve Bank of Australia, which is deliberately targeting the working class with continual interest rate rises aimed at creating a recession and driving up unemployment to shut down workers' demands for higher wages.

Pampas workers confront powerful enemies, but the working class is more powerful. To unleash this power, workers will need to build a network of rank-and-file committees, at Pampas, throughout Goodman Fielder and the entire working class. This will allow workers to develop joint discussions and actions across industries, and lay the foundation for a broader movement of the working class.

Such a movement will confront not only industrial issues but political ones. 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 to allow companies like Wilmar International to reap record profits while workers struggle to put food on the table.

The fight for this perspective will require a global counteroffensive of the working class, built in opposition to the isolation and nationalism enforced by the union bureaucracies. The basis for this exists in the masses of workers around the world who confront deepening attacks on their wages and conditions, at the same time as sharp rises in the cost of living.

The International Workers' Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees was established by the SEP and its sister parties to provide the political and organisational means through which workers can unite their struggles on a global scale. A Pampas rank-and-file committee will join a movement of workers who have already formed such organisations in multiple industries spanning five continents.

The Socialist Equality Party pledges to provide Pampas workers every political assistance in their struggle. We encourage you to contact us today.



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