

Australia: Pampas pastry workers need rank-and-file committee to prevent future sellouts

Martin Scott**24 January 2023**

Having rammed through a sell-out enterprise agreement at Pampas, the United Workers Union (UWU) bureaucracy is determined to ensure that the struggle is over, although none of the issues confronting workers have been resolved. Together with Goodman Fielder management, the UWU leadership is putting workers under immense pressure to accept that there is nothing they can do to fight the massive cut to real wages at the Melbourne pastry and bread factory.

Pampas workers should reject the insistence that they throw in the towel. Instead, they need to work over the political lessons of this dispute and begin preparations to renew their struggle for improved wages and conditions. Such a process of clarification is impossible within the straitjacket of the UWU leadership, which has not even publicly commented since the sell-out was forced through.

Workers need their own organisation, a rank-and-file committee, as the forum for democratic discussion. Such a committee can also establish links with workers at other Goodman Fielder facilities, and prepare for the struggle that must be taken up in the next enterprise agreement period in 18 months time.

Why is it essential that workers continue to fight?

- Every day this union-management agreement goes unchallenged, workers will fall further behind the rapidly rising cost of living. The 4.5 percent nominal wage increase is far short of the official inflation rate, which is now the highest it has been in more than three decades, at 7.8 percent.

- Exploitative labour-hire arrangements will not be stopped by this deal. New rights for casuals to move to permanent jobs contain numerous loopholes and, in the best case, will only apply to new workers after 18 months.

- This defeat for workers will embolden Goodman

Fielder to carry out ever-sharper profit-driven attacks against the entire workforce, potentially including restructuring and sackings.

This fight cannot be put off until the new enterprise agreement expires in September 2024. What will have changed in 18 months if the union bureaucracy remains in charge?

Management will insist on even deeper cuts to real wages and/or conditions. Workers will again be told their demands are unrealistic. The UWU leadership will employ all the same tactics to suppress workers' demands for industrial action and, if a strike does break out, to crush it. The only difference will be that, having endured another two years of declining real wages, workers will be under even greater financial pressure not to strike.

The UWU bureaucracy sabotaged the Pampas struggle from the beginning. The "strike pay" provided was less than a quarter of workers' normal wage and completely insufficient to sustain a lengthy strike. No real picket was established, so limited production was allowed to continue and stock was allowed to pass in and out of the factory. The dispute was completely cut off from the broader working class, including other Goodman Fielder workers, who were not even made aware that the strike was taking place.

Two conclusions must be drawn from this: First, workers cannot leave their fate in the hands of the union bureaucracy, and second, that the fight for real wage increases, secure jobs and decent conditions must proceed.

Both of these point unequivocally to the urgent need for workers to build a new organisation of struggle—a rank-and-file committee, democratically controlled by workers, not highly paid union executives.

This committee will need to overcome an atmosphere of disappointment and confusion that is developing within the plant. This is not an unexpected side-effect, but a

situation deliberately fostered by the UWU bureaucracy, to both suppress opposition to this deal and discourage future industrial action.

The hope that either the union apparatus can be pressured to act in the interests of workers, or that different union officials will do so, flies in the face of reality. The union bureaucracy has long acted as a police force for management against its own members. The very process of working through the experiences of the strike would not be permitted by the union leaders because it would reveal their own role in the betrayal.

An open and frank discussion about the shared experiences of workers during the dispute, the pressures they were subjected to ahead of the vote, and the real needs of workers that still need to be fought for is possible only through a democratic formation overseen and organised by workers themselves. This should involve workers in all sections in the plant, including warehouse workers and labour-hire casuals who were not permitted to vote.

Through this democratic process, workers can begin to develop a plan of action to continue the struggle. But workers in a single small factory cannot take on a vast multinational corporation alone. They will need to turn out to workers throughout Australia and around the world who confront similar attacks on their jobs, pay and conditions.

As a first step, Pampas workers should link up with their counterparts at Goodman Fielder's other Victorian facilities, Clayton, Dandenong and Keilor Park, as well as warehouse workers employed under a separate agreement at the Pampas factory itself. In all of these cases, current UWU-brokered enterprise agreements are set to expire in June, meaning the lessons of the Pampas betrayal, and those that came before it, will be vital to avoid a repeat performance.

A network of rank-and-file committees across multiple Goodman Fielder factories would dramatically change the dynamic of those upcoming industrial disputes. But workers will need to be prepared for a harsh retaliation, not just from the company and the union bureaucracy, but from the whole state apparatus.

Australia's draconian anti-strike laws, introduced and strengthened by successive union-backed federal Labor governments, including the present one, are explicitly designed to shut down any such unified fight by workers. The purpose is to prevent any challenge to the ongoing and deepening slashing of wages and conditions, in order to drive up corporate profits and place the full burden of

the economic crisis on the shoulders of the working class.

This means that what workers confront is not simply a wage dispute, but a political struggle against Labor and the industrial courts, as well as the unions and all other defenders of the capitalist system.

Goodman Fielder and the UWU will argue that last Tuesday's vote is evidence that those who oppose the deal are in a small minority and that most workers are unwilling to fight. This is a dangerous and divisive lie.

Workers are not to blame. This rotten deal has not been imposed because workers lacked determination and resolve. Those characteristics were demonstrated beyond any doubt during their courageous strike. Workers stayed out for four weeks, in the face of aggressive efforts by the company to shut down the strike and the union bureaucracy's attempt to starve them out.

Nor does the result stem from selfishness on the part of workers. This dispute was centrally about one section of workers standing up for another, through the demand for permanent full-time jobs for labour-hire casuals, who had no right to vote on the agreement.

Workers' concern for their colleagues was turned against them by the UWU bureaucracy and management, who engineered a deal in which workers will pay for supposedly secure jobs for their colleagues through cuts to their own wages. The (twice delayed and so far undelivered) promise that some labour-hire casuals would immediately be made full-time was used to make workers feel that a "no" vote was a vote against decent, stable conditions for their co-workers.

More fundamentally, workers who voted "yes" did not do so out of agreement with the deal, but because they could see no way forward with a union leadership that, throughout the dispute, worked systematically to undermine them in order to impose the demands of management.

Critical lessons must be drawn from these experiences by workers at Pampas, throughout Goodman Fielder and the entire working class. Without a fight to build rank-and-file committees, break free from the stranglehold of the union apparatus, this scenario will play out time and time again.



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