Australian Pharmaceuticals Industry warehouse workers' strike in serious danger due to union's isolation tactics

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A strike at an Australian Pharmaceuticals Industry (API) warehouse that has around 190 workers is in serious danger of defeat, amid an ongoing effort by the United Workers Union bureaucracy to isolate the struggle.

The initial strike ballot, reported by the Fair Work Commission on June 2, was sent to 160 API workers covered by the United Workers Union. Of the 135 who voted, 96 percent were in favour of an indefinite strike. This was centrally aimed at rejecting company efforts to impose a real wage cut through a new enterprise agreement.

This determination and unity have since been systematically undermined by the UWU apparatus. One API worker has told the *World Socialist Web Site* that since the strike began on June 23, significant numbers of workers have left the picket. The worker reported that there are now 86 workers still on strike, while 105 are working in the plant.

The worker also understands that the company's original offer will be put to the vote again. This was previously voted down because it involved sub-inflation nominal wage rises of 5, 4, 3.5 and 3 percent over the next four years.

On the UWU's online fund appeal, there is evidence of worker frustration. One comment reads: "I am glad I am out here protesting to get a better wage increase and not one of the ones that went back in with their tails between their legs like weasels."

It must be strongly emphasised, however, that what has emerged within the API strike is not the fault of those workers who feel unable to continue striking, but rather that of the UWU bureaucracy.

The union has a track record of allowing workers manning picket lines to suffer acute financial hardship. The WSWS recently recalled the experiences of UWU-covered pickets at Smeaton Grange Coles in Sydney (locked out for 14 weeks), McCormick Foods in Clayton (on strike for 6 weeks), General Mills in western Sydney (3-week strike), and Pampas in Footscray (4-week strike). In each instance, sell-out agreements were imposed after workers were worn down.

The UWU API fund appeal has currently raised nearly $12,000 of the $20,000 target, with the latter figure amounting to just $105 per API worker. It is unclear whether the UWU is providing those taking industrial action with any strike pay. In other disputes, money provided proved inadequate to prevent workers from missing mortgage and rent bills—during the 4-week Pampas strike in Footscray that ended last January, the UWU provided workers with just two payments of $500 each.

Meanwhile, the UWU sits atop assets of $300 million, including $94 million in cash reserves. Senior union officials receive lavish salaries—UWU national secretary Tim Kennedy has an annual salary and benefits of $241,000.

From the outset of the API strike, UWU bureaucrats worked to isolate the action and ensure that it remained within the antidemocratic straitjacket of the Labor government's Fair Work industrial regime. Workers were gagged, told by union officials not to speak to anyone about what was happening.

This week, a WSWS reporter spoke with a warehouse worker who worked in a factory a short walk from the South Dandenong's API plant. He had seen the picket but, despite being a UWU member, had not been told

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anything and did not know what it was about.

Last Monday, the WSWS noted, “Nothing more than sporadic social media posts have been issued to publicise the strike. No solidarity actions of any kind have been organised involving other warehouse workers or UWU members.”

The only thing that has changed since then is a handful of tokenistic initiatives, including the issuing of photos of a small number of other warehouse workers holding statements of solidarity with the API strikers. Yesterday, without publicly advertising the event beforehand, the UWU organised a demonstration in central Melbourne outside the headquarters of Wesfarmers, the corporate giant that owns API. Comprising about 50 people, with a significant proportion of those union officials, the event featured chanting and speeches denouncing corporate greed without any discussion of a strategy to take forward a successful struggle.

Wesfarmers-API has gone on the offensive. It is refusing to concede the UWU’s modest demand of an API wage rise in line with the official inflation rate of 7 percent, amounting to just an extra $2.25 an hour. Management took advantage of a brief suspension of the strike last week to call workers into meetings in small groups, in which they were pressured and intimidated over the strike action. The union did nothing in response to this provocation. The company appears to have maintained operations, including through trucks entering and leaving the facility without challenge.

The UWU is an active player within the Australian Labor Party’s right-wing faction. Several former union officials from the UWU’s predecessor unions, the National Union of Workers and United Voice, now work as politicians in state and federal parliaments.

The UWU spent $840,000 on affiliation fees to the Labor Party in just one year (2021?22, the most recent figures publicly available), as well as $1.2 million in pro-Labor electoral expenditure. At API, the UWU has welcomed five Labor parliamentarians. These are false friends of warehouse workers!

The federal Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and the state Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews serve the interests of big business and finance capital, not the working class. These administrations have continued the onslaught on wages and working conditions, which has resulted in the historic decline in workers’ living standards amid surging costs of living and record profit accumulation by corporations.

In advancing this pro-market agenda, state and federal Labor governments have worked hand in hand with the trade union apparatus headed by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU). Sally McManus, ACTU secretary, who received more than $210,000 a year, is scheduled to appear tomorrow at the API picket. Her appearance represents a harbinger of a UWU-orchestrated sell-out of the strike.

API workers are confronted with the urgent task of taking their struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucracy. A rank-and-file committee ought to be elected, led by trusted workers in the warehouse, which will firstly unite the API workforce behind the strike on the basis of a determined turnout to other sections of the working class. The widest appeal must be issued to the numerous other sections of workers confronting similar attacks on their real wages, jobs, and conditions, beginning with warehouse workers throughout Victoria and Australia.

The *World Socialist Web Site* encourages API workers to contact us and develop a discussion on these critical political questions.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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