

Australian Pampas factory worker speaks with WSWS on API warehouse strike

Our reporters
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The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with a worker at the Pampas bread and pastry production plant in Footscray, Melbourne on the ongoing strike of warehouse workers at Australian Pharmaceutical Industries (API).

The API strike, about to enter its third week, is centrally aimed against management efforts to impose a real wage cut. It is however, now in serious danger of being sold out by the United Workers Union (UWU) bureaucracy, which has isolated the industrial action from other sections of the working class (see: “Australian Pharmaceuticals Industry warehouse workers’ strike in serious danger due to union’s isolation tactics”).

The UWU has a long record of imposing defeats. At Pampas, around 50 food manufacturing workers went on strike for four weeks in December 2022 and January this year. The UWU settled the dispute by imposing a 4.5 nominal wage rise, only marginally higher than the company offer of 4 percent that workers rejected before striking, and significantly lower than the inflation rate that was then over 7 percent. Claimed gains in transitioning additional labour hire workers into ongoing positions proved illusory. In the last six months, Pampas management has exploited loopholes allowing them to maintain the exploitation of casual workers, many young, immigrant university students.

One Pampas worker involved in the strike has been following the API dispute via the WSWS.

He explained: “API is pretty much following the same pattern as what happened to workers in the Pampas strike. The workforce overwhelmingly votes to take action, then the union organises the picket line, but workers receive little or no strike pay. No support from the wider working class is organised by the union, so that after some time workers start to go back inside the

plant. That is the starving out tactic they used for us—the end result for us is we basically gave in. The same thing I fear is going to happen at API.”

The worker continued: “At Pampas, we received some strike pay but this was only from the second week onwards, after some workers had already gone back inside. We received two payments of \$500, over four weeks. Considering that inflation at that time was almost 7 percent, and everything was continuing to increase in price, you can imagine the pressures on people. I ran out of money, and had to ask people I knew for help to pay my bills. Many of the casuals ran out of money which is why they went back in.”

He added: “The situation was unsustainable, and the union was forewarned. The union was told by the delegates and many of the workers that we can’t properly sustain this for more than a week, so if we’re going to strike then it had better be done correctly from the beginning—a hard strike stopping all production.

“With Pampas we did our best to push for a hard picket, but the union officials from day one wanted to delay action until the last minute. They blocked off only one gate, when there were three others still open, and trucks were still coming in to pick up collections and drop off raw ingredients. Many of us argued from day one that there is little point in us being outside the plant—picketing, taking strike action, trying to raise awareness in the wider community—if production continues.

“At the API strike, the exact same pattern, the exact same playbook, appears to be happening. The UWU is doing a whole fanfare in the beginning, and then as the strike wears on people are, one by one, going back inside, because no hard action is being taken. Unless you’re at the point where you are going to make the company lose some money, to force them to stop

production, you can't have any advantage over management. At Pampas we had no advantage because we were isolated even from other workers within the factory itself, because the warehouse workers are on a separate EBA [enterprise bargaining agreement] so they weren't allowed to come out on strike. Critically that's where production continued, with them loading on to the trucks."

The worker spoke about the UWU's support for the Labor government's antidemocratic Fair Work industrial regime, under which so-called secondary, or solidarity, strikes are illegal.

"Many of us asked the union why the warehouse workers couldn't come out with us," he said. "A union official explained that they were on a different EBA, and that when the Fair Work Act was enacted, there were negotiations between the Labor and Liberal parties, that there were all sorts of nuances and compromises that had to be made because of the way politics is run... According to the official, over the years, as the Liberal Party was attacking workers' right-to-strike, the Labor Party had to make compromises."

In reality the UWU's predecessors and other trade unions helped draft the so-called Fair Work legislation, the provisions of which serve the bureaucracy's efforts to suppress the class struggle.

The Pampas worker characterised the negotiated end of the strike at his workplace as "a sell-out, pure and simple."

The worker said he agreed with the *World Socialist Web Site's* call for the formation of a democratic rank-and-file committee at API, independent of the UWU bureaucracy. "It is really vital they have their own committee," he said. "It has to be among the workers—get together, choose your leaders, get your own delegates or get the whole committee to go straight to officials say, 'we demand a vote to say how we resolve this on our terms.'"

The worker added: "I want to tell API workers: don't make the same mistake as Pampas workers by waiting till the last minute to speak out. Speak out now and hold the officials to account. I would say to my fellow comrades at API, don't give up without a fight. At Pampas, the company was actually scared of us in the end, because they thought we were going to continue. That's why the union forced us to call the strike off. If we work together we definitely will win."



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