

United Workers Union promotes Australian Labor government at API warehouse workers' strike event

Our reporters
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The United Workers Union (UWU) on Saturday held a “family day” event near an Australian Pharmaceuticals Industry (API) warehouse in south-east Melbourne, where nearly 100 workers have been on strike for more than two weeks. The event underscored that the workers’ strike is in serious danger, with the union isolating the struggle and allowing company management to go on the offensive.

UWU officials promoted Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) secretary Sally McManus and federal Labor Minister for Home Affairs Clare O’Neil. These are figures hostile to the working class. McManus has overseen decades of trade union sellouts, and is a close ally of the big-business Labor government. O’Neil is a leading member of that government, which is presiding over the assault on jobs, wages and conditions.

While they rolled out the red carpet for these right-wing forces, the UWU officials were hysterically hostile to Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaigners, who were blocked from speaking to workers about broadening the struggle.

McManus and O’Neil offered nothing but empty platitudes. The ACTU secretary, who receives more than \$210,000 a year, said: “I’m here to bring the support of the whole trade union movement to your fight here, to your strike here.”

In reality, the trade unions have done nothing to support the API workers. Not a single section of the working class has been mobilised to back their fight, including warehouse workers employed by the company in other plants, as well as others covered by the UWU.

Last Friday, several workers at an API plant in Marsden Park, Sydney, told WSWS reporters that they were being made to work extra shifts because of company efforts to offset the impact of the industrial action at the South Dandenong plant in Melbourne. The UWU, which covers the Sydney plant, is thus functioning as a strikebreaker against the Melbourne workers.

McManus continued: “If you are prepared to stick together one day longer than their [company management] resolve, one day longer than the local manager, it will be shown that they underestimated you. If you’re prepared to do that and not give up you will absolutely win, and I have no doubt that this group

of workers, that you, will.”

This covered over the fact that numbers of workers have left the picket since the strike began. This is the UWU bureaucracy’s responsibility—a consequence of its isolation of the strike and provision of inadequate financial assistance for workers who have gone without wages for two weeks. A worker last week informed the WSWS that there are now 86 workers still on strike, while 105 are working in the plant, many of these casuals with very little job security. This situation follows a 96 percent vote for an indefinite strike in a ballot sent to 160 API workers covered by the UWU.

This Thursday the company is putting its offer to another vote. Workers previously rejected a proposed enterprise agreement involving sub-inflation nominal wage rises of 5, 4, 3.5 and 3 percent over the next four years. The UWU is calling for a 7 percent annual wage increase, just \$2.25 an hour more, which is in line with the inflation rate, though lower than the actual surge in living costs affecting workers.

O’Neil addressed the API workers on Saturday, declaring, “I’m here today to tell you that your government stands with you in this huge fight.”

This is a bald lie. The government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has done nothing in support of API workers. The actions of the company are a direct application of the program being overseen and spearheaded by the federal Labor government.

Since being elected in May last year, Labor has displayed its complete fealty to the corporations and big business. Amid the worst cost of living crisis in decades, it has declared its opposition to pay increases even in line with inflation. In other words, O’Neil spoke for a government that is wage-cutter in chief.

Labor has returned the budget to surplus on the back of sweeping cuts to education, healthcare and other essential services for the working class, including by “restraining” the pay of workers in these key sectors. Meanwhile, it is proceeding with massive Stage Three tax cuts which will provide the corporations and the ultra-wealthy with yet another bonanza.

O'Neil made no commitment to do anything with regard to the industrial dispute, instead expressing the desire that company management "show you proper respect, respect you as humans, as individuals, and sit down and negotiate in good faith, and I hope that the company sees reason."

The member of the Albanese cabinet spoke as though she and fellow members of the federal government are powerless bystanders. In reality, the Labor government functions as a ruthless enforcer of the interests of big business and finance capital. It maintains the antidemocratic, union-backed Fair Work industrial relations regime under which employers have free rein to advance their agenda, while many basic forms of worker industrial action are criminalised.

The Albanese government is tied to the major corporations by a thousand strings. This includes via close relations with Wesfarmers, the retail conglomerate that owns API. The company, one of Australia's largest and most profitable, pays \$110,000 every year for elite "platinum level" corporate membership in the Federal Labor Business Forum, which provides exclusive access to private events with government ministers.

Last May, for example, Treasurer Jim Chalmers featured at a post-budget Federal Labor Business Forum "boardroom lunch" event in Perth. The *West Australian* reported: "Tickets are being sold for \$5,000 a pop or \$4,000 for forum members. The fundraiser details are being tightly held—even the flyer doesn't have its location." Geoffrey Watson, a former counsel assisting the Independent Commission Against Corruption in New South Wales, told the newspaper: "There is only one reason that someone would pay \$5,000 for such a lunch... it is to buy access or favours from the Labor Party."

The UWU is a powerful player within Labor's rightwing faction, and pours hundreds of thousands of dollars every year into the party via affiliation fees and electoral donations. The bureaucracy has accumulated assets of \$300 million, including \$94 million in cash reserves, and senior union officials each enjoy annual salaries approaching a quarter of a million dollars.

This is not an aberration. The unions no longer function as workers' organisations in any sense of the word. They are apparatuses, staffed by wealthy functionaries who work on behalf of company management.

More broadly, it is Labor and the trade unions, led by the ACTU, which are responsible for the dire conditions workers confront. Beginning in the 1980s, Labor and the unions launched an unending offensive, smashing up sectors of industry that were not sufficiently profitable, slashing jobs, wages and conditions and abolishing the last vestiges of industrial democracy. The watchword, then as now, is to make Australian industry globally competitive at the expense of workers, who are confronted with a continuous race to the bottom.

Given the class character of the union, its intense hostility to Socialist Equality Party campaigners is no surprise. While

parading around with a Labor minister, who directly serves the corporations, and the ACTU chief, who does their bidding every single day, the UWU officials slanderously claimed that the SEP campaigners were aiding API management.

The union bureaucracy is hostile to the SEP's call for the strike to be broadened, its fight for unity of workers across the board and for the struggle to be taken into rank-and-file hands. These positions, in the interests of workers, cut across the sell-out operation involving API, the ACTU, the UWU and the Labor government.

The attacks on the SEP campaigners, who were prevented from speaking with API staff, are an attack on workers. Their purpose is to send a warning that any workers who criticise the sordid manoeuvres of the bureaucracy or who seek to develop a genuine struggle will be harassed and victimised by the union officials.

That was the entire purpose of the "family day." As in other recent disputes the UWU officials have sold out, the Labor minister and ACTU chief were brought in to place maximum pressure on workers to accept a regressive agreement. The UWU officials are, in effect, telling workers: "We may be pushing a reactionary deal, but in doing so, we have the support of the government and the leader of the entire union movement. There's nothing you can do about it."

But in fact there is an alternative. In the first instance, workers should vote "no" to the wage-cutting agreement to block the sellout.

The struggle must urgently be taken out of the hands of the UWU bureaucracy. That means the establishment of an independent rank-and-file committee, controlled by workers themselves. Such a committee can make a powerful appeal to API workers across the country for joint action, and to warehouse workers more broadly, who are all under assault. It can formulate demands that reflect the needs of workers themselves, not what the union officials and management say they will grant.

We continue to encourage API workers to contact us and develop a discussion on these critical questions.



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