

Australian Pharmaceutical Industry workers vote down company offer again as strike enters fourth week

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Workers at an Australian Pharmaceutical Industries (API) warehouse in Dandenong South, Melbourne, last Thursday again voted to reject a real wage cutting company-proposed enterprise agreement. Their strike now enters its fourth week.

The United Workers Union (UWU) which covers workers at API announced the result on Friday but provided no details of how close the vote was or what the revised offer included. The *World Socialist Web Site* has warned that the union bureaucracy's refusal to mobilise broader industrial support for the striking workers has placed the strike in grave danger.

While 130 of the 135 workers who voted in the 2 June ballot supported an indefinite strike, on 5 July one worker told the WSWs there were only 86 workers on strike and 106 working. The UWU's longstanding refusal to provide striking workers with full strike pay, despite sitting on over \$90 million of cash reserves, has resulted in significant numbers of warehouse workers, especially casuals, returning to work because they have been unable to remain on the picket.

The previous company offer of sub-inflation nominal wage rises of 5, 4, 3.5 and 3 percent over four years was rejected before the strike began, and an identical or very similar offer has now been voted down. API workers have taken an important stand, determined to secure a pay increase that enables them to survive crippling mortgage interest rates, soaring rents and energy prices.

Speaking to 3CR Radio at a "family day" organised by the UWU on July 8, API worker Tracey explained, "We've got people on the poverty line and they are eating better on the picket than they do at home. They won't turn their heating or cooling on, they won't buy

food because they're paying for their mortgages."

Another worker detailed how they had responded during COVID lockdowns when their workload skyrocketed: "The afternoon shift was here to 3 a.m. in the morning. The day shift was starting about 4 a.m. We were doing incredible hours. When COVID first came along, none of us knew a lot about COVID. We didn't know if it was risking our health but we still had to come here every day and every night. We agreed to an extremely low pay deal at the time to help management, because no-one knew what was going to happen to the world. It was on a bit of a promise that after the pandemic they would look after us very well with a pay rise. And here we are..."

API worker Tracey explained another issue at stake, "There's two different redundancies and we just want the cap taken off one of them so everybody has a fair go." The redundancy clause in the previous agreement has two tiers of redundancy payments for workers employed before or after 2009.

The issue of redundancy entitlements has not been publicly clarified by the UWU and suggests behind closed doors discussions between union officials and company management on mass sackings driven by automation-restructuring.

API is part of Australia's second largest company by employee number, Wesfarmers. It is maintaining supplies to its Priceline retail network by continuing operations at other warehouses across the country, with the backing of the UWU. A worker at API's Sydney facility recently told the WSWs that production has been increased to undercut the Melbourne strike.

Wesfarmers and the UWU are both major political and financial supporters of the pro-business Labor

Party through donations and affiliation fees. Wesfarmers gets special access to meet privately with government Ministers through their \$110,000 per year platinum level corporate membership of the Federal Labor Business Forum.

The UWU have used the picket to provide photo opportunities for a parade of Labor parliamentarians pretending to support the strike. Federal Labor government member Carina Garland (a former trade union bureaucrat) and state Labor government members Gary Maas (former UWU state secretary), Jackson Taylor (former police officer), Tim Richardson, Meng Heang Tak, and John Mullahy attended the picket and were promoted on social media by the UWU.

The federal Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese is implanting a brutal anti-working class austerity agenda of real wage cuts and slashed access to social services while implementing tax cuts for the wealthy and massively expanded military spending.

State MPs on the API picket line are part of the Premier Daniel Andrews state Labor government that imposed below inflation pay increases on public sector workers. To take just one example, they worked with the Australian Education Union to impose a nominal wage rise of just one percent every six months (less than 2 per cent per year) on 90,000 government-employed education workers last year, as inflation peaked at 8.4 per cent. In other words, Wesfarmers are following the Victorian government lead in trying to impose under-inflation pay rises.

While welcoming the Labor Party parliamentarians, UWU bureaucrats have whipped up frenzied opposition to Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaigners.

The SEP has been targeted because it has warned API workers against the union's preparations for a sell-out and encouraged them to set up a rank-and-file committee to take the strike out of the control of the UWU bureaucrats.

Lying UWU bureaucrats have asserted that management placed a pile of WSWS leaflets in the API lunchroom—in fact these were left by workers who received copies from SEP campaigners outside the warehouse and wanted their colleagues to have access to the articles. The UWU's anti-democratic tactics are to stifle political discussion of the issues facing API workers.

The attitude of corporate Australia to the SEP was spelt out in the course of the bitter sell-out of Sydney Coles Smeaton Grange warehouse workers by the UWU. In February 2021, Matt Swindells, the Coles Group's chief operations officer, declared: "The only people who have an alternative plan are the extreme socialists who have infiltrated this dispute. They've got their voices in the ears of people, and they're suggesting this wider agenda of taking on big business and the banks."

API workers at the Brisbane warehouse are about to embark on negotiations with Wesfarmers over their enterprise agreement renewal. The union has limited any contact between that incipient dispute and the Melbourne strikers to a brief video on the UWU Facebook page.

But the simultaneous enterprise agreement negotiations at various factories indicates the way forward in the strike: a unified offensive by API workers, across the country, to fight for their common interests. Such a struggle cannot be waged within the straight jacket of the union bureaucracy, it requires a network of rank-and-file committees across the company's operations.



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