

Woolworths warehouse workers in Australia face punitive performance monitoring

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Woolworths, one of Australia's two major supermarket chains, has implemented harsh new measures to impose speedups on its warehouse workers. Despite registering record profits in recent years, the company is seeking to satisfy shareholder demand for increased "productivity."

The new "Coaching and Productivity Framework" was introduced to Woolworths warehouses early this year as a punitive means of extracting ever-greater labour value from workers. If fully implemented, the Framework would impact around 8,000 permanent Woolworths employees across 15 warehouses as well as thousands more casuals.

While some aspects of the Framework have been "paused" due to opposition from workers, the so-called "engineered standards" it enforces remain in place.

Woolworths establishes benchmarks of how long it should take to pick items from the warehouse shelves and then workers must complete their tasks within the set time to achieve a rating of 100 percent. Anything less than 100 percent is considered failure and workers are then "counselled and may be disciplined." For the many casuals employed in Woolworths warehouses, that could mean termination.

At the end of each shift, workers' scores are posted on screens for all to see, to try and humiliate them into compliance. This is intended to pressure workers to the maximum, drive up productivity and enable the company to slash jobs without reducing output.

The *Guardian* recently published anonymous comments from Woolworths warehouse workers who have been subjected to the harsh speed-up measures.

The newspaper reported that one worker, who was ordered into the retraining program despite having worked at the facility for years, "said it was 'humiliating' to be followed around the warehouse by a 'coach,' just as it causes daily embarrassment to have your efficiency score shown on the screen for anyone to see when you clock off for the day."

Another worker, who was engaged by a labour-hire firm at Woolworths warehouse in Perth around three years ago, said the "engineered standards" were already unreasonable at that stage.

He told the *Guardian*: "I remember getting a pick estimated time for two pallets that was mostly cartons of beer and it was

something like 19 or 21 minutes and I ended up doing it in 45.... Of course, that dropped my efficiency percentage way down.

"You've got the time limits, you're rushing, you're panicking. You're not thinking. And so ... the risk of injury is there."

Another worker said, "I can't sleep thinking about what would happen if I lost my job because I didn't meet the standards a few times and my average wasn't high enough."

Workers explained that any number of regular occurrences in a busy warehouse, such as congestion in aisles, stock depletion requiring re-stocking by forklifts, spillages, flat batteries on devices such as the headsets workers must wear, would lead to failure to meet the targets.

Physical or mental issues impacting any worker as part of everyday life are not considered in the setting of performance targets. The only mitigating factors for the tracking programs were pregnancy or disability. Age is not a factor.

Bathroom breaks longer than allowed are challenged by the company, with some workers reporting being instructed to "stop all time-wasting and non-productive behaviours."

The concepts behind "engineered standards" were pioneered by American mechanical engineer Frederick Winslow Taylor and summed up in his 1909 book, *The Principles of Scientific Management*. This has been lauded by management consultants as the most important book of the twentieth century.

Taylor used stopwatches to measure a worker's every movement, essentially treating workers like machines or components of the machines that they operate. These methods have been used by corporations for over a century to squeeze every drop of productive labour out of workers.

But why, in 2024, is a highly profitable company like Woolworths stepping up its enforcement of these harsh measures? The answer lies in the fact that capitalism as a system of production demands that every branch of industry attains the same level of productivity or it will be the subject of takeover and restructure.

Warehouse giant Amazon has spearheaded the use of invasive tracking systems and irrational performance metrics, aimed at weeding out workers who are unable to keep up, and pushing those who remain to work ever-faster for fear of losing their jobs. Capitalism demands that every company must follow suit.

In this process, the role of the trade unions is to implement and enforce these new measures to achieve “best practice” and “international competitiveness.” The unions argue that if they don’t, the company will go broke and everyone will lose their jobs.

Woolworths is Australia’s largest private-sector employer. Together with Coles, it functions as a duopoly, controlling 67 percent of supermarkets in the country. In the financial year of 2023?2024, Woolworths reported a net profit after tax of \$1.71 billion. Coles reported a net profit of \$1.1 billion, a 2.1 percent increase on the previous year.

In a submission to a recent government inquiry into price gouging, the United Workers Union (UWU) stated: “Coles and Woolworths increased their margins throughout the pandemic, as supermarkets were recognised as essential and remained open.... Yet in enterprise bargaining, the supermarkets often tightly control wage increases for directly employed workers.”

This is a damning indictment by the union leadership of their own role in assisting the supermarkets to suppress wages. The UWU sees its members as passive victims of whatever the supermarkets dictate. Despite workers voting overwhelmingly for strikes during enterprise bargaining negotiations, the UWU bureaucracy has largely suppressed industrial action and rammed through real wage cuts on behalf of the companies.

Dario Mujkic, UWU national logistics director, said of the Framework: “It’s all nefarious, and it’s been happening for a number of years... We accept that people need to work to the best of their ability, and people generally do, but the company needs to work on a way to manage people’s work without applying [an] unfair, Orwellian and, frankly, discriminatory system.”

The union is posturing as an opponent of the widely hated Framework, not because the bureaucracy opposes management’s ever-increasing productivity demands, but because the automated character of the system threatens to cut it out of the process of imposing them.

Mujkic said the UWU is in ongoing talks with Woolworths. In other words, the bureaucracy is working with management to devise a system that will deliver the productivity gains the company wants, without raising the ire of workers beyond the level the union can control.

Similar union-management collaboration has been on display in recent years as the supermarket chains have shut down warehouses and destroyed thousands of jobs through the introduction of advanced automation. Coles has opened two new ADCs (Automated Distribution Centres) at Kemps Creek in Sydney and Redbank in Brisbane. Woolworths’ first ADC is in Melbourne’s south east and they are preparing to open new ones at Moorebank in Sydney.

The starkest example of this was at Coles’ warehouse at Smeaton Grange in southwest Sydney. In 2020?21, the entire workforce of more than 300 was locked out for more than three months. Aware that the facility was slated to close within a few

years, workers demanded improved redundancy pay as well as a wage increase.

The UWU blocked any fight by workers against the closure, insisting that the destruction of their jobs was inevitable. The union’s initial posturing around “fair redundancies” and an above-inflation pay rise was quickly revealed to be a fraud.

The union kept the dispute isolated from the rest of the working class and sought to starve workers out with no strike pay. This brought the workers, who were determined to fight, into conflict with the UWU bureaucracy, repeatedly voting down the virtually unchanged union-management offers, even after the union declared the dispute over.

Eventually, the UWU was able to push through a sell-out deal, but the incipient rebellion of workers against the bureaucracy was taken as a warning by the union, management and the political establishment.

These experiences underscore the pressing need for Woolworths and other warehouse workers to build new organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees led by workers themselves, not highly paid bureaucrats. These committees need to be independent of the UWU, or any other union, and allow democratic discussion in which workers can develop strategies to defend their jobs and fight for real improvements to wages and conditions.

The issues confronting Woolworths employees are not confined to a single company, or even a single country. Throughout the world, workers are being subjected to increasingly harsh productivity demands, as the ruling class seeks to impose upon their backs the burden of the escalating global capitalist crisis.

Therefore what is required is a unified struggle by workers worldwide, directed not only at their immediate employers, but the capitalist system itself.



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