

Strike by more than 1,500 Woolworths warehouse workers enters second week

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More than 1,500 workers at four Woolworths warehouses in Victoria and New South Wales (NSW) are maintaining an indefinite strike that began on November 21. Workers at a fifth facility, owned by Lineage, which almost exclusively supplies the supermarket chain, have also been on strike since November 22.

In addition, workers at Woolworths' Heathwood Chilled and Frozen Distribution Centre (HCFDC) in Queensland walked off the job for 24 hours yesterday.

The industrial action is over workers' demand for real pay rises in new enterprise agreements and an end to the company's punitive and dangerous performance monitoring "Framework." Woolworths, which is Australia's largest private-sector employer and which reported a net profit last year of \$1.71 billion, has offered workers nominal annual pay rises of just 3 to 4 percent.

The continuation of the strike into its second week reflects the determination of workers to fight. But to do so will require a rebellion against the United Workers Union (UWU) bureaucracy, which has been working towards a sell-out deal since even before workers walked off the job.

In the days leading up to the strike, UWU secretary Tim Kennedy stated publicly that Woolworths would only need to increase its meagre pay "rise" offer by 1 to 1.5 percent per annum. In other words, workers' demands for annual pay rises of 10–12 percent were abandoned before the strike began.

This is also expressed in a UWU petition addressed to Woolworths CEO Amanda Bardwell, which does not mention wages at all. Instead, the petition plaintively calls on Bardwell to "meet with [union members] and hear their stories" about the "Framework."

Under this "Framework," 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.

Working conditions, safety, and the brutal measures imposed to extract ever-greater productivity and profits from workers is a major concern for workers at Woolworths, Lineage, and more broadly in the warehousing industry.

But workers should not have to pay for humane working conditions through real pay cuts. The UWU's singular focus on the "Framework," to the exclusion of discussing wages, is a clear sign that such a concession is being prepared.

According to a November 28 article in *Red Flag*, Woolworths offered workers at the Erskine Park, Sydney, facility a "reduced Framework," in which mandatory performance requirements were lowered from 100 percent to 75 or 85 percent. Given that what constitutes "100 percent" is ever-changing and entirely in the hands of management, such a change would be essentially meaningless.

While this was resoundingly rejected by workers, it illustrates the nature of the negotiations that are taking place behind closed doors. What management and the UWU bureaucracy are seeking to determine is how much of a nominal change to the hated "Framework" is needed before workers will grudgingly accept it.

But the insatiable demand for speed-ups, close monitoring of workers and harsh disciplining of those seen as not measuring up did not begin with the introduction of the "Framework." These are the basic methods of industrial capitalism, in operation for more than a century and exacerbated since the 1970s by the globalisation of production, computerisation and, increasingly, artificial intelligence driven systems.

The UWU postures 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, as all the unions have done for decades.

This means that these methods can only be ended, and decent pay and conditions for warehouse workers won, through a struggle against capitalism itself. This is the perspective fought for by the Socialist Equality Party and this is one reason that

the UWU officialdom is going to great lengths to prevent striking workers from speaking to SEP campaigners at the pickets.

The UWU's hostility to the SEP is also based on the party's exposures of the union's rotten history of betraying and selling out workers in one major dispute after another, and its call for workers to draw the necessary conclusion from this history—that workers need to take matters into their own hands.

The latest example was at the Heathwood facility yesterday, where UWU officials immediately tried unsuccessfully to stop workers taking *World Socialist Web Site* articles and talking to SEP supporters.

A UWU organiser declared: "These are our people. They have decided not to speak to you, so leave." Officials stood in front of the team, seeking to block any discussion.

A young worker nevertheless gave comments to the WSWs, before he was interrupted deliberately when UWU officials suddenly called a meeting of the workers at the picket.

"It's ridiculous that a billion dollar company can't scrape enough to offer us a fair deal," he said. "They are spending thousands of dollars on security and moving products around, for what?"

Some workers at the Heathwood facility had read the WSWs previously. One commented on the fact that top UWU and other officials sit as board members on one of Woolworths' biggest shareholders, Australian Super Pty Ltd, giving the union leaders a vested interest in driving up investment returns and hence corporate profits.

The worker recalled that it was the Hawke and Keating Labor governments of 1983 to 1997 that set up the compulsory superannuation system. Under this scheme, workers' real wages have been cut in favour of supposed employer contributions into these joint employer-union investment funds, pouring billions of dollars into the share market. Workers were much worse off as a result, he said.

Another worker said the flat rate at the warehouse was just \$33 an hour, which is not enough to live on for workers with young families. He said a recent survey found that many people in Australia were even skipping meals.

By contrast to the anti-democratic actions of UWU officials to try to stop workers discussing with the WSWs team, the same officials welcomed the presence of half a dozen members or supporters of the pseudo-left Socialist Alternative (SA) which defends the pro-business trade union apparatuses.

When challenged to take a stand against the UWU's political censorship, these SA representatives refused to do so. Instead, they declared their support for the attempted ban on any discussion with the WSWs team.

Likewise given the red-carpet treatment by the UWU at the Sydney and Melbourne facilities this week were numerous Labor MPs, as well as Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) secretary Sally McManus and President Michele O'Neil.

Speaking at Erskine Park yesterday, McManus offered nothing but empty platitudes, telling workers, "I just want to say on behalf of every union that we are behind you." The fact is that neither the ACTU nor any union has done a thing for striking Woolworths workers. No other section of workers has been mobilised to back their fight. This includes the tens of thousands of other warehouse workers covered by the UWU, including at more than a dozen other Woolworths facilities around the country, whose continued labour is ensuring that disruption to the company's operations and profits is kept to a minimum.

The Labor government has overseen the worst hit to working-class living conditions since the 1950s, with workers' purchasing power declining by about 9 percent over the past three years.

The ACTU, having enforced this crisis through sell-out enterprise agreements in every industry sector, are now echoing Labor's fraudulent claims of real wage growth. In an ad campaign launched recently under the banner "Don't Risk Dutton [the federal Liberal opposition leader]," McManus declares "We must defend what we have won." Conscious of growing hostility to the federal government, Labor is not mentioned by name, but the message is clear.

This should come as no surprise—the ACTU, like the UWU, is an integral part of the Labor Party and its pro-business governments.

The UWU's fraudulent promotion of these figures as allies of striking Woolworths workers—and the SEP as their enemies—must be seen as a stark warning.

To avoid yet another sell-out, striking Woolworths workers need to take matters out of the hands of the UWU bureaucracy. That means the establishment of independent rank-and-file committees, controlled by workers themselves.

Such committees can make a powerful appeal to Woolworths workers across the country for joint action, and to Coles workers and warehouse workers more broadly, who are all under assault. They must formulate demands that reflect the needs of workers themselves, not what the union officials and management say is possible. Workers must not be forced to pay for their safety and job security through real wage cuts!

Above all, what is required is a unified struggle based on a new political perspective—the fight for a workers' governments, to implement socialist policies. Woolworths and Coles, along with other major corporations and banks, must be placed under public ownership and democratic workers' control.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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