

Australia: Striking warehouse workers block Woolworths' attempt to break picket line in Melbourne

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This morning, Woolworths attempted to forcibly re-open its Melbourne South Regional Distribution Centre (MSRDC) in Dandenong South. The facility, along with two other Woolworths warehouses in Victoria and one in New South Wales have been shut down since November 21 by an indefinite strike over wages, conditions and safety.

Workers at a fifth facility, owned by the company's supplier Lineage, in Melbourne, have been on strike since November 22. In total, more than 1,800 warehouse workers are involved in the ongoing strike. Hundreds more workers at a Woolworths distribution centre in Heathwood, Queensland, also walked off the job for 24 hours on Friday.

This morning, the major supermarket chain tried to break the picket line at Dandenong South by bringing workers in on buses. More than a dozen police were reportedly sent to aid the strikebreaking effort, indicating the direct involvement of the Labor government in this attack on a legally "protected" strike.

Although the striking workers and protesters were able to hold their ground this morning, the company's action is a major attack on democratic rights and a stark warning of what is to come. Unless the strike is rapidly expanded to include other Woolworths employees and broader layers of the working class, it will be crushed.

In a letter to all Woolworths employees yesterday, the company claimed to have contacted "almost three-quarters of the team at the site, where a majority (72%) of those contacted indicated they want to return to work and be paid in the critical lead-up to Christmas." 72 percent of three-quarters would amount to only 54 percent of the workforce.

The letter repeats its emphasis on the fact that workers have not been paid, underscoring the significance of the refusal by the United Workers Union (UWU) to provide proper strike pay. Instead, the union has set up a crowdfunding page, which has raised just over \$23,500—an indication of the mass support for the strike but a tiny fraction of what workers need to sustain their fight. The UWU bureaucracy sits on \$274.9 million in total assets, ultimately derived from workers' dues.

The letter claims, "The majority of team members at MSRDC are not members of the UWU. The Shop, Distributive and

Allied Employees' Association (SDA) have endorsed an offer from Woolworths Group presented last week."

UWU Secretary Tim Kennedy claimed this was "irrelevant," stating vaguely that the SDA "has less than 10 members affected by the framework in this dispute."

In fact, it is highly significant. Last week, Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) leaders Sally McManus and Michele O'Neil were welcomed to Woolworths picket lines with open arms by the UWU leadership. The SDA is a major player in the ACTU—its national secretary, Gerard Dwyer, is a Senior Vice President of the peak union body.

Even as McManus was telling striking workers at Erskine Park on Friday, "I just want to say on behalf of every union that we are behind you," one of the largest unions in the country was either in the process of stitching them up or had done so already. It is not plausible that McManus was unaware of this fact.

McManus not only oversees the work of the unions. She is also a senior member of the Labor Party, whose attitude to the striking workers, and industrial action in general is starkly revealed in the sending in of police to help Woolworths forcibly reopen the warehouse.

The ACTU- and Labor-backed strike-breaking attempt by Woolworths is an egregious display of the company's hostility to its employees, but the conditions for this were created by the UWU leadership.

The fact that workers at five Woolworths facilities in three states, as well as those at the company's supplier, Lineage, have all taken strike action demonstrates that workers face the same issues across the board, but the UWU has actively worked to isolate the strike, disarm the workers and prevent a broader mobilisation of support.

This is starkly demonstrated in the fact the company's vow to break the strike, sent to employees yesterday and reported in the media last night, is not even mentioned on the union's social media. The workers went to the pickets today totally isolated in the face of the escalation of attacks by the company.

The UWU's limp criticism that Woolworths' strikebreaking effort was an act of "bad faith" reflects the fact that the union

bureaucracy is not leading a fight against the company, but engaging with it in backroom negotiations to orchestrate a sell-out. The union's concern was that the strike-breaking effort would disrupt a bargaining meeting due to be held this morning.

The reality is that the UWU has been working to sell workers out from the beginning. Even before the strike started, Kennedy made clear that the company needed only to raise its wage-cutting offer by 1–1.5 percent (a total of 4–5 percent) per annum, despite the fact that workers had voted to strike on the basis of fighting for a 10–12 percent a year rise.

Stepping in to cover over the UWU hanging workers out to dry, the pseudo-left Victorian Socialists called for “community supporters” to reinforce the picket. The fact that somewhere between 100 and 200 people turned out to defend the strike is significant, indicating broader support for the struggle among working people. Limited protest actions are no substitute for expanded industrial action, which the UWU is actively blocking with the uncritical support of Victorian Socialists.

For the vast majority of Woolworths warehouse workers around the country, their only inkling that thousands of their colleagues are on strike has been increased overtime and workload, as their distribution centres have been employed to pick up the slack and minimise shortages on supermarket shelves. The only political organisation that is informing workers of the strike by their co-workers is the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS).

Workers at Woolworths' large Brisbane Regional Distribution Centre (BRDC) at Larapinta told SEP campaigners yesterday that they knew little or nothing about their fellow workers' indefinite strike in Victoria and New South Wales.

Hundreds of workers were on the job there, many more than normal on a Sunday. The company is effectively using them to combat the strike, without even being informed by the unions about it.

Others had heard of the strike from the media and called for united action against the company's poor pay and oppressive performance monitoring system, in which they said workers are constantly under camera surveillance.

As they drove in and out of the facility, workers stopped to take WSWS leaflets about the strike and give comments. They thanked the SEP supporters for providing them with information and for fighting to broaden support for the strike.

“We have had no information meetings here,” one warehouse worker said. Another said: “We're up for a strike. It should be everywhere... The unions are in with the company; their reps get paid meetings. It's like the unions have shares in the company.”

A worker who knew of the strike said: “This place should be on strike too.” Another worker said: “I agree we should all come out.” One worker who had not heard about the strike commented: “The unions don't bother telling us. They don't

have the guts to call a strike. They are cowards.”

The SDA primarily covers the facility, but workers who were UWU members said the silence had been deafening from both unions. The fact that the UWU had done nothing to apprise BRDC workers of the industrial action is particularly stark, given that workers at Heathwood, just 4 kilometres away by road, struck for 24 hours on Friday.

The attempt by Woolworths to break the strike at MSRDC is a major attack on the democratic rights of the entire working class. Australia's draconian anti-strike laws, imposed by successive Labor governments and enforced by the union apparatus, already prohibit industrial action, except during brief bargaining periods every three to four years.

Today's events demonstrate that even this limited right cannot be tolerated by the ruling class. With the clear involvement of the Labor government at the state—and likely federal—level, cops have been mobilised to help shut down a supposedly “protected” strike.

This is a direct consequence of the UWU's isolation of the striking workers. To fight this attack, the broadest layer of workers must be urgently mobilised in support of the strike and their own workplace rights.

This is impossible as long as the UWU, or any other union bureaucracy, is calling the shots. Woolworths workers need to take the power back, by building their own rank-and-file committees, politically and organisationally independent from any union officialdom.

Through these committees, they can make a powerful appeal to their counterparts at other Woolworths facilities, at Coles and throughout the logistics sector who are all under assault.

Today's attack underscores that workers are not only up against Woolworths, but Labor, the union apparatus, the industrial courts and the capitalist system itself.

This demonstrates the need to fight for a workers' government to implement socialist policies. The major corporations, including Woolworths and Coles, along with the big banks, must be placed under public ownership and democratic workers' control. Only in this way can society's vast resources be used to satisfy the needs of the entire working class, including a permanent and safe job with decent pay and conditions, not the profits of the wealthy elite.



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