

Australian rank-and-file educators support striking Woolworths workers

Our correspondents

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Published below are letters of support from Australian university and school educators for the more than 1,800 warehouse workers whose strike against major supermarket chain Woolworths and its supplier, Lineage, is now well into its second week.

Today and yesterday, workers at one of the five striking facilities resisted attempts by the company to forcibly re-open the warehouse. The presence of police at the site makes clear that this attempted strike-breaking operation has been orchestrated in collaboration with the Labor government at the state, and likely federal, level.

The response of the United Workers Union (UWU) bureaucracy to this major attack on democratic rights has been to cover it up. Not a single word has been written on the union's social media about the company's attempt to crush a legal, supposedly "protected," strike, in a deliberate effort to isolate the workers and prevent the broader involvement of the working class.

At the same time, the UWU leadership has engaged in protracted backroom talks with Woolworths, aiming to stitch up a sell-out deal that will leave workers worse off in real terms and do nothing to resolve the harsh and unsafe working conditions they confront.

This poses the urgent need for Woolworths workers to build their own organisations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, and take the power back from the union bureaucracy, in order to prevent the betrayal that is being prepared.

Western Sydney University (WSU) Rank-and-File Committee, December 1

The Western Sydney University (WSU) Rank-and-File Committee of educators, professional staff and students urges the widest support by workers and students everywhere for the more than 1,500 workers on an indefinite strike at four Woolworths warehouses in Victoria and New South Wales (NSW) since November 21.

We also urge support for the workers at Lineage Cold Storage in Laverton, which almost exclusively supplies the supermarket chain, who have been on strike since November 22, and for the workers at Woolworths' Heathwood Chilled and Frozen Distribution Centre in Queensland who walked off the job for 24

hours.

We heard about your fight through the *World Socialist Web Site*. You are standing up against a sub-inflationary wage offer from the company, the largest corporate employer in Australia, and increasingly draconian and unsafe working conditions. Your strike raises decisive questions for the entire working class, not just in Australia but internationally.

You are in a struggle against a corporate giant, largely owned and controlled by the world's three largest investment funds and Australia Super, a union-employer superannuation fund. Top union officials, including United Workers Union (UWU) national president Jo-anne Schofield, sit as board directors on Australia Super, giving them a direct financial interest in driving up the profits, and thus dividends and share prices, of Woolworths.

You also confront the Albanese Labor government and all its partners in the trade union apparatuses, on which the government is relying to prevent a wider breakout by workers against the imposition of a worsening cost-of-living and housing affordability crisis.

In its enterprise bargaining process with the UWU, the company, which reported a net profit last year of \$1.71 billion, has offered you only nominal pay increases of 3 to 4 percent per annum. That is far short of what is needed to keep up with the soaring cost of living for working-class households or make up for previous losses.

You are also opposing the onerous and dangerous conditions associated with the company's "Coaching and Productivity Framework." Under this system, workers are constantly monitored and must complete all tasks within times set by management, or face disciplining and possible sacking.

This speed-up is part of an attempt by Woolworths, one of Australian capitalism's largest stock exchange-listed companies by revenue, to satisfy the dictates of the world financial markets, which are demanding ever-higher investment returns and share prices. Workers everywhere around the world, including in the universities and schools, confront the same offensive.

Your continuation of the strike into its second week reflects your determination. But to win will require a rebellion against the UWU bureaucrats, who are working toward a sell-out deal. UWU national secretary Tim Kennedy has 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, your demands for annual pay rises of 10–12 percent were abandoned before the

strike began.

A UWU petition addressed to Woolworths CEO Amanda Bardwell does not mention wages at all. Instead, the petition pleads for Bardwell to “meet with [union members] and hear their stories” about the “Framework” as if this corporate chief is not aware of the draconian and unsafe conditions!

The financial elite’s control over Woolworths and every other major corporation means that decent pay and conditions can be won only through a struggle against capitalism itself. But the UWU officials are trying to stop you from discussing this socialist perspective with supporters of the Socialist Equality Party.

We are very familiar with the anti-democratic methods of the union apparatuses. We formed our rank-and-file committee to fight the National Tertiary Education Union’s (NTEU) collaboration with the WSU management’s pro-business restructuring of the WSU’s preparatory college, the WSU College, slashing jobs and courses in the process.

The NTEU’s 2022 enterprise agreement with WSU, pushed through undemocratically, pledges to assist moves by management to make the College “competitive in the market,” which meant “it may need to change its structure, operations, and priorities to meet business requirements.”

The NTEU has tried to block our ongoing struggle against this assault, which involves forcing staff to compete against each other for the remaining jobs on lower pay and purging experienced educators. NTEU representatives have even removed our members from union meetings!

Now thousands of jobs are being eliminated across the tertiary education industry, with the NTEU preventing any unified struggle because of its support for the Albanese government.

So we say from bitter experience that to avoid yet another sell-out, you need to take matters out of the hands of the UWU bureaucrats. That means establishing independent rank-and-file committees, controlled by workers themselves.

Such committees can appeal to Woolworths and all warehouse workers in Australia and globally for joint action, and formulate demands based the needs of workers themselves, not what the union officials, management and the investment giants say is possible.

Committee for Public Education, December 2

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) stands in full support of the more than 1,800 Woolworths and Lineage Cold Storage workers who have now been on strike for nearly two weeks at five warehouses in Victoria and New South Wales. This shows you have a real determination to fight.

We have been following your struggle closely through the *World Socialist Web Site*. The attempt by Woolworths this morning to break the picket line at Dandenong South with police assisting the strikebreaking effort indicates the direct involvement of the Labor government in this attack on a legally “protected” strike.

The company’s action is a major attack on workers’ democratic

rights and a stark warning of what is to come. Unless the strike is expanded to other Woolworths employees and broader layers of the working class, it will be crushed.

We support you in your fight for better conditions and a safer workplace. The dangerous and punitive “Framework,” in which workers are constantly monitored and must complete all tasks within times set by management or face disciplining and possible sacking, amounts to sweatshop conditions where workplace safety is severely compromised.

This workload intensification is a global phenomena, with corporate giants imposing increasing productivity targets to satisfy the dictates of the world financial markets, which demand ever-higher investment returns and share prices. Workers everywhere around the world confront a similar offensive.

Your strike raises decisive questions for the entire working class, not just in Australia but internationally. Your fight is being watched by workers around the world who are in their own battles for decent pay and safe working conditions.

Your struggle is against Woolworths, which is the largest private-sector employer in Australia and which reported \$1.71 billion in net profits last year. But you also confront the Albanese Labor government and its allies in the trade union apparatus. The government is relying on the unions, including the United Workers Union (UWU), to prevent a wider breakout by workers against the worsening cost-of-living crisis as well as the preparations for war abroad.

We warn that you are also in a struggle against the union bureaucracy which is already preparing the way for a sell-out deal. UWU national secretary Tim Kennedy has 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, your demands for annual pay rises of 10–12 percent were abandoned before the strike began.

As educators we understand what it is like to have the union bureaucracy abandon our pay claims in negotiations with employers, and to ignore the horrific working conditions that we confront every day.

We urge you to take matters out of the hands of the UWU bureaucrats. That means establishing rank-and-file workplace committees, democratically controlled by workers themselves and politically and organisationally independent from any trade union.

Such committees can link up with other workers across Woolworths, Coles and throughout the logistics sector in Australia and globally. This must form part of a unified global struggle for demands based on the actual needs of workers themselves, not what fits within the profit interests of big business.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)