

Striking Australian bakery workers at Allied Pinnacle need a new political strategy

Paul Bartizan, Martin Scott
27 May 2025

Around 150 workers at the Allied Pinnacle bakery in Altona North in Melbourne's industrial heartland have waged a series of strikes, seeking a pay increase and improved penalty rates for night-time shift work.

The plant runs three shifts per day, usually six days per week and sometimes seven. Workers say that 90 percent of them rely on overtime payments and weekend penalty rates to make ends meet. Workers struck for 48 hours starting May 14 and then 72 hours starting May 20.

Workers have rejected the company's offer of a 11.25 percent nominal pay rise over three years, far short of what is needed to keep up with the soaring cost of living. The United Workers Union (UWU), which covers the striking workers, is calling for three 5 percent annual increases over the life of the next enterprise agreement, totalling 15 percent.

Workers are also seeking an increase to the night shift penalty rate, currently 19 percent, to the industry standard rate of 30 percent.

The union pay demand is itself woefully inadequate. Under the previous UWU-management agreement, workers received annual nominal pay rises of just 2.6 percent, while inflation peaked at 7.8 percent.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics Living Cost Index for "employee households," which more closely reflects the impact of rising costs for workers than the official inflation figure, has increased by 28 percent over the past 5 years, while Allied Pinnacle workers' wages rose by only 20 percent. That is a real wage cut of 8 percent, meaning a pay rise in line with the union demands would still leave workers worse off than they were in 2019.

Allied Pinnacle makes flour products for other manufacturers as well as baked goods for retailers including major supermarkets Coles, Woolworths and Aldi. In total, the company supplies some 3,000 businesses from its 20 flour mills, bakeries and other facilities across the country. The Altona site is the company's largest and produces a broad selection of pastries and cakes, including the popular range of mud cakes sold in Coles supermarkets, of which some 15,000 are produced each day.

The company is owned by a global food conglomerate, Tokyo-based Nisshin Seifun Group, which acquired Allied Pinnacle in 2019, adding to its operations in the US, Canada, China, Thailand and New Zealand. Nisshin Seifun sees restructuring Allied Pinnacle as a major strategic goal and is aiming to increase

Australian operating profits by ¥10 billion (\$A108.3 million) over the five years to 2027.

On May 20, Allied Pinnacle unsuccessfully applied to the Fair Work Commission (FWC) for a "bargaining order" to shut down the limited industrial action. The company claimed that the striking workers were illegally stopping trucks from entering the site. In fact, while 16 out of 17 delivery vehicles did not access the site on May 14, the following day most trucks were able to enter, aided by the police.

The FWC also heard that, during the May 14–15 strike, "production operated on night shift with a full complement of employees." This is a product of previous union-management enterprise agreements placing no restriction on the company's use of casuals and third-party labour-hire, whose precarious employment status places them under enormous pressure to work during the strike.

This, together with the time-limited, on-again-off-again stoppages called by the UWU leadership, despite overwhelming support from workers for an indefinite strike, has ensured that the impact on the company's output and profits has been kept to a minimum.

At the same time, by not providing strike pay, the UWU is placing those workers who *are* taking part in the industrial action under financial pressure to take on additional overtime and weekend work outside of the strike days, and ultimately to accept a sell-out deal.

The union has plenty of resources to provide full strike pay. The UWU last financial year reported that nationally their 148,136 members paid a total of \$83,649,976 in dues and the union's total assets jumped to \$275 million, up from \$268 million a year earlier.

This process of starving striking workers out until they begrudgingly accept a union-management deal is a well-worn tactic of the UWU and all other union bureaucracies. But there are other parallels to recent UWU-orchestrated betrayals that must serve as a stark warning to workers at Allied Pinnacle.

The company's use of police—no doubt with the knowledge and approval of the state Labor government—to break up the picket and escort trucks into the facility echoes attempts by Woolworths to bus in scabs to break a strike by more than 1,500 workers across four warehouses in November–December last year.

There, the company also sought the intervention of the FWC, which handed down a highly unusual ruling—that the strike could continue, but only so long as union officials told workers they

were not to block access to the sites.

This order by the pro-business industrial court, whose intervention was endorsed and advised by the federal Labor government, was a harsh and anti-democratic one, even within the framework of Australia's draconian anti-strike Fair Work Act.

But it was the UWU bureaucracy, not Woolworths, the FWC, the police or the Labor government, who brought about an abrupt end to the strike. Under the pretext of the FWC ruling, union leaders immediately sent workers home, before convening a sham show-of-hands vote the following morning to ram through a deal that delivered none of workers' demands.

To avoid a similar betrayal, Allied Pinnacle workers need to take matters into their own hands. A rank-and-file committee, democratically led by workers, not highly paid union bureaucrats, must be built to lead this struggle. The fight must be for demands based on workers' needs, not what management says is affordable, or what the union says is achievable.

In the first instance, such a committee should insist that an indefinite strike be called, with the vast resources controlled by the UWU used to provide full strike pay to all workers involved. Casual and labour-hire workers should be encouraged to join the strike, again with full strike pay, and an undertaking from full- and part-time workers, as well as the union, that retribution by management against any worker, whatever their employment status, will not be tolerated.

This UWU bureaucracy is intensely hostile to this perspective and is doing whatever it can to prevent Allied Pinnacle workers from speaking to representatives of the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) and Socialist Equality Party (SEP). We encourage workers to consider the implications—what is it that the UWU officials are so desperate to hide?

The WSWS not only exposes in detail the UWU's filthy history of betrayals, but explains what is behind them: Like every other union, the UWU bureaucracy does not represent the interest of workers, but serves as an industrial police force, enforcing the profit-driven demands of management and suppressing the opposition of workers to deepening attacks on their wages and conditions.

While SEP campaigners are shouted down and blocked by the UWU, Socialist Alternative/Victorian Socialists are welcomed with open arms. This is because this organisation, together with the other pseudo-left groups, serves to cover up the perfidious role of the bureaucracy.

Socialist Alternative's *Red Flag*, in a May 19 article, depicted an "infectious" carnival-like atmosphere at the Allied Pinnacle picket, claiming a "worker" declared, "If you ever get the chance to, go on strike!"

This is preparing the way for the union bureaucracy and their pseudo-left cheer squad to falsely claim a sellout as a victory. Rather than a strike being the means to an end, to gain essential improvements to pay and conditions, they are trying to tell workers that the mere act of walking off the job is a triumphant experience, whatever the outcome.

The pseudo-left cover for union betrayals because they, like the union bureaucracy to which they have the closest of ties, do not represent the working class, but a grasping section of the upper

middle class, seeking to expand their own privileges within the capitalist system. Despite their left talk, they serve as a last line of defence for Labor, the trade unions, and, ultimately the capitalist system itself.

The perspective they are desperate to block—a unified struggle by the working class, politically and organisationally independent of the unions and Labor—is the one that Allied Pinnacle workers need to adopt.

This has nothing in common with the sham "solidarity" promoted by the UWU. The union has publicised the fact that the Allied Pinnacle strike is happening simultaneously with a strike by Pepsico workers at the Smith's Snack Food plant in South Australia. But this idle juxtaposition of two disputes 700 kilometres apart, with no suggestion of a joint mobilisation, is merely a cover for the actual role played by the bureaucracy, ensuring that neither strike—each of which is at a massive multinational corporation—spreads beyond a single workplace.

Through an Allied Pinnacle rank-and-file committee, a powerful appeal can be made to other sections of workers, starting with those employed at other Allied Pinnacle plants across Australia, throughout the food manufacturing sector and more broadly, to join the struggle. This would not be based on token "solidarity," but the fact that workers throughout the country and around the world all confront similar attacks on their wages and conditions, at the hands of corporations and capitalist governments.

What is required is a political fight against the domination of the corporate elite over society and all those political forces that defend it. That means a struggle against the state and federal Labor governments, which are presiding over an austerity offensive aimed at making the working class pay for the crisis of capitalism. The UWU is openly aligned with the big business Labor governments, something that the pseudo-left is covers up.

The alternative is the fight for a workers' government based on socialist policies, including placing essential industries like food production, as well as the major corporations and banks under public ownership and democratic workers' control, so that society's vast resources can be used to provide the needs of humanity, not further enrich the wealthy elite.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact