# Australia: CSR plasterboard factory workers locked out over pay claim

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Workers at the CSR Gyprock factory in Yarraville, Melbourne have effectively been locked out by the company over a pay claim.

After workers began limited work bans on November 14, part of "protected" industrial action, management threatened it would not pay workers who took part. Workers responded by going on strike—the only option left besides accepting the company's proposed enterprise agreement or working for free.

CSR has offered workers a four-year agreement containing nominal pay increases of 4 percent in each of the first two years, 3.5 percent in the third and 3 percent in the fourth. This would be totally inadequate to keep up with the rising cost of living. The official annual inflation rate is already at 3.8 percent and shows definite signs of rising further, with a 1.3 percent increase recorded in the September quarter alone.

There are around 60 full-time workers at the highly automated manufacturing plant, which supplies plasterboard (drywall) products to the building industry and retail customers.

CSR is the largest plasterboard maker in Australia, and the only brand stocked by major hardware and building products supplier Bunnings. The company is also a key manufacturer of numerous other building products, including insulation, cladding, bricks and rooftops.

CSR was acquired for AU$4.5 billion last year by French multinational Saint-Germain, which employs some 170,000 workers worldwide.

Workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* that CSR had prepared for the lockout by stockpiling product in advance and hurriedly training casuals to serve as strikebreakers.

A worker who has been at CSR for nearly 10 years explained, "The strike is about a pay increase. [CSR] just made $230 million in 12 months. We're doing more work than normal. What we're asking them is to increase the skill level allowance to a dollar per hour. Some people load trucks and others make up customer orders. We're asking for that skill level to be recognised.

"At the other plaster factory, Knauf, they are on $46 per hour loading trucks and I'm on $38. The machine operators over there, the base rate is $51 per hour. Here the highest rate is $46."

He pointed to the contrast between what CSR charges customers for plasterboard products and what it pays the workers who make them: "They put up their prices every three months. It used to cost $190,000 to build a 230 square metre home in 2009. Today you're looking at four or five hundred thousand for that same house. So they're making money and plenty of it. What they make in one week apparently pays everyone's wages for a whole month. The rest is money in their pocket.

"We used to have two or three casuals per shift, and now last time I counted it was nine or ten. They've got a lot of casuals in there now and they're buying them lunch every day [during the lockout].

"They bought another warehouse to fill that up with product because we asked for an increase. They had every intention to kick us out. We told them that we won't do the overtime. They had until Friday night [November 14] to come to an agreement but they just refused.

"The rich get richer, the poor get poorer. For [a worker] to have something nice, you have to think two, three times about it. [The bosses] don't think about it. They're coming in brand new cars. They've got everything they need and if we hit a certain [production] benchmark, they get the bonuses. They don't give it to the workers."

Another worker, also with nearly ten years' experience at CSR, said, "Who they have in there now is all casuals. A lot of the processes have changed. For example, for us to train up an operator would [normally] take maybe three months. But now they're just signing things off. They already started before we even were out here. They were preparing to lock us out."

He explained that, between their low wages and the soaring cost of living, workers were increasingly reliant on regularly putting in large amounts of overtime: "We do 12-hour shifts, 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. So we'll work three days one week, four days the next week. Then we do overtime on our days off. We've got young people who have new families that bought houses or they're still renting."

The Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU), which covers the workers, has put forward a pay rise demand for little more than what the company has offered: 4 percent per annum for the four years, plus a one-off increase in the "skills allowance," from 65 cents per hour to $1, per skill.

The CFMEU demand is barely higher than the current official inflation rate, and likely well short of coming rises—the consumer price index rose 1.3 percent in the September quarter alone. Moreover, it is far below what is needed to make up for past losses, imposed in previous CFMEU-brokered enterprise agreements.

In late 2021, workers at the Yarraville plant struck for three weeks, before the CFMEU bureaucracy declared “victory” on the basis of a 4 percent per annum pay deal, under conditions where inflation was already at 3.5 percent and on its way to a peak of 7.8 percent the following year.

A CFMEU organiser acknowledged in a radio interview at the time that, although CSR workers were the lowest paid in the industry, at the company with the highest line speeds, the union was “not even asking them to come up and be paid market rate or parity with the competitors” and was only asking for a pay increase to “cover inflation.”

The CFMEU bureaucracy carried out a similar operation at Knauf’s Port Melbourne facility the following year, again in the face of a company lockout. Knauf workers in Sydney were not even told by the union that their Victorian counterparts were in a dispute, much less mobilised to take action against the company to support their struggle.

Here again, the CFMEU leadership is isolating the locked-out CSR workers. While dozens of delegates and officials, including National Secretary Zach Smith, have been dispatched to the site in a phoney show of solidarity, nothing is being done to halt production at the company’s other facilities.

In addition, the union is ensuring Yarraville workers comply with measures in the draconian Fair Work Act, preventing them from blocking the transport of the stockpiled plasterboard and that produced by casuals brought in to break the strike.

Moreover, the union covers some 80,000 building workers across the country. A national ban on the use of Gyprock, let alone CSR’s many other products, would have vast implications for the whole construction industry and place enormous pressure on the company.

Apologists for the CFMEU bureaucracy will claim that their hands are tied by the administration. In August last year, the federal Labor government ordered the sacking of hundreds of CFMEU officials and placed the union under the quasi-dictatorial control of an administrator.

Labor’s anti-democratic attack on building workers was carried out under the pretext of stamping out organised crime and corruption in the union, based on a media takedown campaign whipped up around a handful of unproven allegations against CFMEU officials. As the WSWS explained from the outset, the real purpose was always to drive down wages and conditions throughout the construction industry and more broadly.

The episode revealed more starkly the role of the CFMEU bureaucracy and the union apparatus as a whole. Most of the country’s unions, led by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), backed the attack on the CFMEU with gusto.

The building industry unions, along with the ousted CFMEU officials and the few that retained their positions, made an initial show of opposing the administration. But this lasted only as long as it took to divert the enormous hostility of workers—expressed in multiple mass strikes numbering in the tens of thousands—away from a fight and behind a hopeless legal case, plaintive appeals to the same Labor government that had carried out the assault, and illusions that the union can carry on with business as usual.

However, the impact of administration does not fully explain the role being played by the CFMEU at Yarraville. As the previous bitter experiences at CSR and Knauf, along with countless others, demonstrate, the bureaucracy’s tactics of isolating workers and helping the company wear down their savings and their resolve, before imposing a sell-out deal, are nothing new.

This is the same modus operandi employed by all the unions, which serve as an industrial police force of management, relying on Australia’s draconian anti-strike legislation—co-drafted by the unions and imposed by successive Labor governments—to tell workers that any struggle outside of the narrow framework of enterprise bargaining is impossible.

To fight for real improvements to wages and conditions, workers at CSR need to take matters into their own hands. This means building a rank-and-file committee, democratically run by workers, independent of the CFMEU bureaucracy, to fight for demands based on workers’ needs, not what the company or union says is affordable or possible.

Through such a committee, workers at Yarraville can make a powerful appeal for support to other plasterboard manufacturing workers, at CSR and elsewhere in Australia, as well as Saint-Gobain’s global workforce and the construction industry more broadly.

The fight at CSR is inseparable from a broader political and industrial fight against the administration and the federal Labor government that installed it, involving the tens of thousands of building workers across the country, whether they are members of the CFMEU or not.