

Australia: UWU boss posturing as “rank-and-file” candidate in union election

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The United Workers Union (UWU), one of Australia’s largest unions with approximately 143,000 members across aged care, early childhood education, warehousing, hospitality and cleaning, is holding its first contested national election since its formation in 2019. Delegates will be elected by members from April 30; a National Convention will then choose national officers in July.

The result will change nothing for workers, as is highlighted by the fact that the main competing tickets are led by the national secretary Tim Kennedy and national president Jo-Anne Schofield.

The dispute is divided along the lines of the two unions that merged to form the UWU: Kennedy’s National Union of Workers (NUW), aligned to the right-wing of the Labor Party, and Schofield’s United Voice (UV), part of Labor’s so-called left. The factions are not only fighting over control of the UWU’s vast resources, but the selection of delegates to Labor conferences and appointees to the party’s executive bodies.

The reality is that there is no substantial difference between Kennedy’s “Members First” grouping and the “United for You” ticket headed by Schofield. They represent two halves of a bureaucracy that has jointly presided throughout the UWU’s existence over the suppression of workers’ struggles and the imposition of management and government attacks on wages and conditions. Whichever faction takes the helm after the election, the UWU will continue its track record of betrayal.

Attempting to distance itself from this history, Members First is posturing as a “rank-and-file” grouping despite the glaring contradiction that it is led by the union’s current boss, who was last year paid more than \$295,000 out of members’ dues.

The sham that Members First represents an alternative for workers is being promoted by the pseudo-left Solidarity and Socialist Alternative (SAlt), continuing the role of these organisations as defenders and cheerleaders of the union bureaucracy. SAlt’s *Red Flag* was unequivocal in its backing of Kennedy’s faction: “Socialists in the UWU should vote for and support Members First.”

Kennedy’s self-reinvention as a champion of the rank-and-file followed soon after the UWU Members Council moved a vote of no-confidence in him over his alleged involvement with IR 21, an NUW election slush fund, which his factional opponents claim owes the union \$850,000.

The UV-aligned faction’s slush fund, Your UTF, was also the subject of a minor scandal last year, when it was discovered that former UWU executive director Ben Radford was still listed as director and company secretary of the fund, a year after being appointed to the Fair Work Commission (FWC), in breach of the industrial court’s rules.

The reality is that Kennedy, together with Schofield and the rest of the UWU bureaucracy, has presided since 2019 over countless sellouts, mass sackings and the closure of entire facilities, imposing management’s will against the opposition of workers.

In late 2024, more than 1,500 Woolworths warehouse workers at four of the major supermarket chain’s facilities struck for 17 days against real wage cuts, brutal conditions and a punitive “Framework” used to discipline workers who failed to meet unrelenting speed-up demands.

From the start, the UWU leadership worked to undermine the strike, refusing to provide strike pay from the union’s vast resources and isolating the striking workers from the rest of the Woolworths workforce, warehouse industry and broader working class. The strikers were forced back on the job after the UWU bureaucracy seized upon a FWC ruling—which, while draconian, did not actually ban the strike—as a pretext to ram through a sell-out deal. The union declared “victory,” although the Framework remained in place and wages were scarcely better than the company’s original offer.

Woolworths was not an exception but part of a pattern expressed in numerous major disputes in the UWU’s history, including Coles Smeaton Grange, General Mills and Pampas.

In each, the bureaucracy was determined to silence Socialist Equality Party (SEP) campaigners, who were raising the urgent necessity of workers building rank-and-file committees to wrest control from the union leadership to avoid betrayal. Among the issues the UWU leadership was desperate to suppress were the demand for strike pay and the need for a political struggle against Labor and the capitalist system as a whole.

With its phoney “rank-and-file” sloganeering, Members First is trying to hoodwink workers who have had bitter experiences with the union and amid growing opposition to Labor in the working class.

As well its fraudulent pledge to put the UWU “back in the hands of members,” Members First claims it will “build an open and democratic union,” “not allow union leaders to make backroom political deals” and “create a strike fund to support UWU members taking strike action.” What is most notable is the extremely limited character of the proposed measures.

The issue of strike pay is one that is starkly posed in any extended stoppage or company lockout, especially as the cost of living continues to skyrocket. In all the recent major disputes, the SEP has highlighted the gulf between the UWU’s vast coffers and the meagre or non-existent strike pay it has provided. In the 2024–25 financial year, the union took in \$89.1 million in membership fees and increased its total wealth to \$291.7 million, including \$11.9 million in cash and other current assets.

Members First's bold strike fund proposal? To set aside \$1 million of this as "seed capital to create a strike fund." In other words, Kennedy et al are not even willing to part with 0.3 percent of the union's financial hoardings to sustain striking workers, but they might let them have some of the investment profits. In addition to being totally inadequate to sustain a strike involving more than a handful of workers for a few days, the very concept fraudulently ties workers' capacity to strike to the success of the financial markets.

Despite the "led by our members, for our members" rhetoric, Members First has no intention of changing the existing undemocratic structure of the UWU, in which a 50-person Member Council, elected by just 483 National Convention Delegates, is (at least nominally) the union's highest decision making body. Members First is merely proposing to allow workers to email the Members Council to "raise concerns or ideas," prohibit union directors from serving on the Members Council and publish the minutes of executive meetings online.

The fraud of "no backroom deals"

Like all the unions, the UWU is not just tied to the Labor Party, it is the Labor Party. As one of the largest unions in Australia, the UWU bureaucracy holds considerable sway over Labor's National Conference and executive bodies. After the 2022 federal election, the UWU boasted, "Albanese Labor Government elected with fourteen United Workers Union Members of Parliament."

Since coming to office in 2022, the federal Labor government has, on multiple occasions, played a key role in shutting down strikes, including by UWU members, and, in 2024, carried out the most direct attack on Australian workers' rights in decades, placing the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU) under the quasi-dictatorial control of an administrator. It should not be forgotten that this unprecedented action was taken with the full-throated support of the UWU leadership, along with most of the Australian union apparatus.

Last year, the UWU gave Labor more than \$1.5 million in electoral donations, making it the second-largest union donor behind the Mining and Energy Union. UWU organisers and delegates are expected to join the Labor Party in elections, and some have allegedly been prohibited from participating—in their own time—in protests against the Gaza genocide.

Under these conditions, Members First's talking point of "no backroom deals" with politicians is clearly motivated by growing opposition to Labor in the working class. But just as leopards cannot change their spots, bureaucrats whose whole existence is built on behind-closed-door machinations with corporate bosses and politicians will not simply decide to abandon their old ways, or the power and privilege they have accrued as a result.

Members First is not proposing a break with the Labor Party in any way, shape or form. They are not calling for an end to political donations and campaign support, only that they not be a "blank cheque," that could potentially be temporarily withdrawn from time to time, "if election commitments are broken." To the extent that this means anything at all, the aim is to promote illusions that workers can achieve their aims through cash-backed appeals to parliamentarians.

This is a fraud. Labor governments at state and federal level are

spearheading a massive assault on wages, conditions and living standards, backing imperialist war and genocide and crushing the right to protest. This agenda of war, austerity and repression is not some minor policy point from which the party can be gently dissuaded, but part of a global process stemming from the spiralling crisis of the capitalist system.

The issues posed in the UWU election are by no means limited to that organisation. Since the 1980s, in line with the globalisation of production, all of the unions have been transformed. Once bodies that could extract limited concessions from employers and governments within a highly regulated national framework, they are now completely integrated into big business and finance capital. Their role is to ensure the "international competitiveness" of Australian corporations by imposing continuous cuts to jobs, wages and conditions through the suppression of working-class opposition.

In Australia, as elsewhere, the union apparatus relies upon the pseudo-left organisations to cover up its filthy record of betrayal. They serve as the last line of defence for the ruling class, using anti-capitalist rhetoric and occasional calls for greater "militancy" as a mechanism to keep workers locked into the framework of the union bureaucracy and Labor.

This is the basis of SALT's endorsement of Members First. They hail the Kennedy faction's handling of the Woolworths strike because it "put working-class power on the front page for a couple of weeks." In other words, it provided a momentary illusion that workers can advance their interests without a break with the union apparatus and a political struggle.

Nothing will be resolved for UWU members through this election, which will end with one or the other faction of the existing bureaucracy taking the reins and carrying on with business as usual. Instead, workers need to take matters into their own hands and build rank-and-file committees in every workplace, politically and organisationally independent from the unions and Labor.

Through such committees, workers can plan, prepare and fight for their needs at work, such as pay rises well over the rate of inflation to reverse years of cuts compared with the cost of living, safe and fair working conditions and secure permanent jobs. Through rank-and-file committees, workers can link up with their counterparts in other workplaces, industries and around the world, in a unified struggle against the common assault being carried out against the working class.

Above all, a fight for a political alternative is required. Capitalism offers a future of endless cuts to wages and conditions, mass unemployment, war and authoritarianism. The alternative is a socialist perspective, aimed at ending the domination of the banks, the corporations and the property developers, and reorganising economic life to meet the needs of working people.



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