

UWU General Mills strike – Rooty Hill, NSW

BY ALEXANDER VOS
THE GUARDIAN
ISSUE #1966
JUNE 21, 2021



Since 4th June, United Workers Union' (UWU) workers at the US-owned General Mills (GM) Rooty Hill factory have been on strike. The strike erupted over GM's subpar wage offer and management's attempt to take a razor to conditions in the factory. At this point the company has offered less than five per cent over a three-year agreement. Along with this, workers are outraged over the attempts by GM to grandfather a redundancy provision, effectively locking in a two-tiered system for new workers. According to UWU official Tom Sayers, "this has become increasingly common in food manufacturing, and it's in an attempt to split the workforce." It is clear from talking to workers on the picket that this is one of the central issues of this dispute. One worker told the Guardian, "We don't want to see other people start here on lower conditions. This is as much about protecting others as it is about protecting ourselves."

At this stage, the UWU members have put to the company their final position, three per cent per annum and no changes to conditions. According to the UWU, the company has rejected this but hasn't responded with a new position. "The company, rather than recognising the workers as essential workers and valuing their labour, has instead punished them. It has attempted to undermine good union jobs that have been won and defended for over a quarter of a century," Sayers told us.

The offer tabled by GM is made more insulting when considered against GM's 2020-2021 third-quarter results (28 February, 2021). The company has seen net sales increase to US\$4.5bil (AU\$5.9), representing an eight per cent increase year-over-year. In the same report, GM Chairman and CEO Jeff Harmening said "We [GM] continued to execute well and delivered profitable growth in the third quarter." ALF-CIO (US peak trade union body) reported that Jeff Harmening himself made US\$10mil in 2019. In 2020 it was reported he received US\$16mil in total, which is an increase of sixty-one percent compared to 2019. According to press releases put out by the UWU, Jeff Harmening has increased his wealth further to US\$24mil in 2021. This level of capital accumulation at a time where workers are still reeling from COVID-19 may seem unfathomable, but it aligns with trends that have shown the pandemic has in fact hastened extraction of the value created by workers into the hands of the bosses.

To combat the strike, GM has been aggressively trying to break the dispute. The NSW Police have disgracefully acted as GM's striker breakers, attempting to break up the picket line. GM Management and NSW police have also directed truck drivers to drive through the picket, with reports that site management drove their car at picketing workers – a complete disregard for workers' safety and right to protest. GM has also been using the labour-hire firm Chandler Mcleod to provide scab labour during this dispute. Many labour-hire workers in the union have attempted to reject work at GM in a show of solidarity. However, it has been reported to us that GM has been intimidating labour-hire into breaking the picket line. However, those labour-hire workers that unfortunately have had to cross the picket line have been feeding the union information. "We know from the info on the inside that GM knows this is damaging their profits and public image. They have had to get office staff to work the floor. They are so desperate," one worker told us.

Despite this, workers are standing together and have found a new sense of unity. A worker on the picket remarked that "we use to be divided in there, this has disappeared now we are fighting for a common goal." Community support has been strong and consistent. Workers from other UWU sites, including Snackbrands, MAURI yeast, and DHL have been present on the picket throughout. Local Labor MP Ed Husic and Labor's shadow industrial relations minister Tony Burke have been out on the picket, as has NSW Teachers' Federation President Angelo Gavrielatos. Many Filipino groups have also come to support the sizeable Filipino workforce at GM, with progressive, Filipino groups like Migrante NSW, Yapak, Bayan, and Anakbayan heavily present on the picket. However, more support will be needed to win against companies like GM. Working class people must stand shoulder to shoulder with all workers in struggle. On this

point, a UWW site delegate signed off with a simple message: "We are calling on the whole labour movement to support General Mills workers."