

General Mills workers show the fight is worth it

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You have to be prepared to fight for what you want.

That is the clear message emanating from the successful strike action taken by General Mills (GM) workers at Rooty Hill in Sydney.

The workforce and their union, the United Workers Union (UWU) have secured a new deal with the American food processing giant that will see them receive a nine per cent pay rise over three years, a \$1500 bonus and the continuation of their current work conditions.

Crucially, their industrial action also secured new protections for the labour hire casual workers and contractors who participated in the strike, staring down threats of reprisals from management.

The union win comes after a strike that lasted over three weeks, as workers exercised their rights to fight for decent pay and conditions.

GM produces well known food brands such as Latina Fresh and Old El Paso, both of which are staples on supermarket shelves all over Australia.

The company has been hugely profitable throughout the pandemic as lockdowns and stay at home orders saw tens of millions of people reliant on staple supermarket food products.

Its sales growth improved by 4.5 per cent in 2020 and its net income growth exploded to 24.45 per cent over the same period. This amounted to a US\$3.2 billion profit in 2020.

Yet, like so many other corporations with fat bottom lines, it steadfastly refused to share any of the success with the workforce that had made it happen, offering an average pay increase of 1.5 per cent over three years.

The company was also shameless in demanding a stripping away of conditions, including a radical overhaul of weekend rostering that would have caused upheaval for the workers and their families.

Tom Sayers is an organiser with the food and beverage team of the UWU in New South Wales. He told “On the Job” GM workers decided to take a stand.

“This campaign was looking for fairness, but also recognition of the work [the GM workers] had done during the pandemic,” explained Sayers.

“These workers worked for up to seven days a week, risking theirs and their family’s health to make sure Australians were fed during the pandemic whilst the management of this company stayed at home.

“Workers came into this hoping that the company would respond with recognition and support for the work they’d done.”

It was wishful thinking as GM management, so used to being able to dictate terms to its workforce, pushed back hard against the workers position on pay and conditions.

“The company came in with a very hard-line approach. They made it clear that they weren’t willing to pass on any share of their Coronavirus profit,” said Sayers.

“They wanted to take away long held union conditions. They had no interest in recognising workers for any of the work that they’d done over the long term, let alone during a pandemic. They just didn’t want to hear it.

“The company attempted to take away union rights. They wanted to grandfather redundancy clauses, remove workers disciplinary procedure, and completely overhaul workers rosters, including enforcing weekend work and lengthening shifts.

“The company came in with a mission to take working conditions backwards and they thought workers were not willing to stand up and take action. They were wrong.”

According to Tom Sayer, the success of the General Mills workers should act as encouragement for workers all over Australia who face similar circumstances – unreliable work, stagnant wage growth and a hostile company that sees them as easy prey for further reductions in their conditions at work.

“I think the takeaway lessons are pretty straightforward. First of all, if you take industrial action, and if you have solidarity and you stick together, you can win against any employer, you can win the wage outcomes and protect conditions that you have, even against the giant, billionaire, multinationals like General Mills. I think that’s the key lesson the workers certainly took from this is that you can win these fights, but you have to be committed and you have to have unity.”

<https://www.australianunions.org.au/2021/07/01/general-mills-workers-show-the-fight-is-worth-it/>