

Australia: Labor Party and unions stifle opposition to Ford job cuts

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The state Labor government and the trade unions in Victoria are working overtime to assist Ford management in carrying out the destruction of 640 jobs at its Broadmeadows and Geelong plants.

As the Socialist Equality Party's (SEP) candidate in Broadmeadows Will Marshall has warned, no campaign whatsoever has been initiated to defend the jobs. Union leaders have told workers that the job losses, announced late last month, are unavoidable in the prevailing market conditions and there is no choice but to accept redundancy packages.

To put a lid on any opposition, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) has claimed that Ford workers are more than happy to sell off their jobs. Speaking from the same script as management, national organiser Joe Cummaudo told the media that a "significant" number of employees considered the redundancy payout "convenient".

Yet Ford workers have told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the company is starting the job cull by pressuring injured workers on light duties to accept a "voluntary" redundancy package. These workers, who would find it extremely difficult to secure alternate employment because of injuries sustained at Ford, are not likely to define being thrown out of work as "convenient".

Cummaudo even declared that the losses would be beneficial, by providing "stability" for the remaining workforce. To regulate production, Ford has put employees on a short week, with just 60 percent of their pay, on more than 20 occasions this year. "We hope as a result of this [the sackings] it will put an end to down days," he said.

If "voluntary" redundancies are not forthcoming, Cummaudo confirmed that the unions were more than willing to assist Ford to impose forced retrenchments.

"If they [Ford] go into forced redundancies, we will go back to negotiations and open up the packages," he said.

The union and the company have already negotiated an increased payout—up from three weeks pay for every year of service to four weeks—but made this contingent on acceptance before November 29. The deal was clearly designed to stampede workers into accepting the offer.

Cummaudo openly bragged about the unions' role in facilitating the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs in the car industry in recent years, including the elimination of 1,200 night shift jobs at General Motors Holden in South Australia. "We've never had an occasion [in the vehicle industry] where the target figure for voluntary redundancies has not been met," he proudly declared.

It is true that some workers, demoralised by ever-worsening conditions in the car plants, opt to get out. Others may take the redundancy package to deal with pressing financial problems caused by the spiralling cost of living.

It must be stated frankly, however, that such short-term reasoning is highly detrimental to the long-term interests of the working class, and plays directly into the hands of the company and the unions.

The deteriorating conditions across manufacturing industries, which are the result of decades of betrayal by the Labor Party and the unions, mean that wherever workers go they face the same terrible situation.

Moreover, any financial relief will be extremely short-lived. Under the current redundancy arrangements, a worker with 10 years service will receive less than one year's base-pay. After that is gone, the humiliating hunt starts for another job.

More importantly, selling off jobs at Ford via

voluntary redundancies undermines the ability of workers at other car plants to resist retrenchments. Not accidentally, as soon as the unions signalled their acceptance of job losses at Ford, General Motors Holden announced the axing of 200 jobs at its Port Melbourne plant.

At the same time, the destruction of full-time jobs condemns young people to a life of low-paid, casual and part-time employment. Undoubtedly, many unemployed youth in Broadmeadows, where official unemployment is 13.4 percent, are the sons and daughters of current or former car workers.

Claims that workers are happy to sell off their jobs are false. Workers only resign themselves to redundancies because the unions and Labor constantly hammer the line that there is no alternative. The company is not selling cars, profits are down—therefore, job cuts are inevitable.

State treasurer John Brumby, the Labor member for Broadmeadows, was challenged by Will Marshall at an election meeting last week over his government's attitude to the Ford job losses. He replied: "The simple fact is that if people aren't buying their cars, it doesn't matter how many public meetings you have then they [Ford] can't employ the people."

Those like Brumby who worship the "free market" never stop to consider the irrationality of the profit system. Cars have never been manufactured to fulfill human need. After all, there are millions of working people in Australia and around the world who cannot afford to own a decent car, while car yards are full to capacity. The only purpose for making and selling a car is to amass profits for the global auto corporations. If profits fall, it is the workers who pay the price.

With the ability to shift production around the globe, Ford is constantly demanding new concessions to maintain production in Australia. Governments and the unions have been only too willing to oblige. Instead of providing funds to the hundreds of workers being tossed out of work, Brumby and his colleagues grant handouts to Ford, one of the world's largest companies.

Earlier this year the federal and state governments handed over \$100 million to assist Ford's research program. Under the Automotive and Competitive and Investment Scheme launched in 2001, Canberra plans to provide more than \$7 million to the auto industry by 2015.

The jobs losses at Ford are a sharp warning that a new round of job destruction is underway. In manufacturing generally, it is predicted that 50,000 full-time jobs will be slashed over the next 12 months.

The unions are already preparing. AMWU state secretary Dave Oliver recently renewed the call for tripartite talks on manufacturing between the federal government, employers and the unions.

The SEP calls on Ford workers to take a stand against the machinations of the unions, the Bracks government and the company and reject the redundancies. The first step is to organise mass meetings to map out a campaign to oppose the job cuts and turn out to other sections of workers, such as those at GMH and the auto parts manufacturers, all of whom are facing the same attacks.

A struggle by Ford workers would attract broad support not only from the working class across Victoria and Australia, but across the world. It would encourage car workers internationally to mount a unified opposition to job cuts and plant closures. Against the predatory activities of global capital, the working class must have its own global strategy based on the complete reorganisation of economic and social life to meet the needs of the majority, rather than the profits of a tiny few.

The SEP is standing in the Victorian state election to fight for this socialist and internationalist perspective. We urge all workers and young people to study our program and to join and build the SEP as the new mass party of the working class.



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