

Australian Ford workers strike against regressive agreement

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Ford Australia workers have launched two 24-hour strikes this month, the first such industrial action in 12 years. More than 300 skilled tradespersons in the maintenance division of Ford's Broadmeadows and Geelong factories in the state of Victoria have resisted repeated attempts by the company and the trade unions to force them onto a new Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA) that undermines conditions and delivers an effective wage cut.

Negotiations began last year with the car giant demanding an across-the-board wage freeze and a new two-tier wage system designed to pit workers against one another, with new hires receiving 15 percent less than the current workforce. Ford also wanted to expand its exploitation of casual and non-permanent employees, particularly during low production times.

The company has since made some minor concessions. For example, it has offered to employ some additional apprentices over the term of the agreement. Ford is also offering a flat \$30 a week annual wage rise for the first two years of the agreement, decreasing to \$20 a week in the third year. This is well below the official inflation index; workers are demanding an 8 percent annual increase. The workers last received a wage rise in August 2008.

The trade unions attempted to ram through the proposed agreement despite the considerable rank-and-file opposition. In November last year the proposed EBA included an initial 12-month wage freeze. Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) Vehicle Division federal secretary Ian Jones publicly declared that the offer was a "reasonable agreement for very, very difficult times", adding: "When you analyse the outcome, in these times, it's quite remarkable".

Some skilled tradespersons who rejected the deal recently spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site*. "Initially the maintenance workers voted against at Geelong by 89 percent

and at Broadmeadows by 92 percent," one worker said. "Not happy with the result, the company employed a private election company to conduct a secret ballot—still 75 percent voted against... In the production line area, which is covered by the AMWU Vehicle Division, 80 percent voted against the agreement in a meeting attended by [union official] Ian Jones. A division of members within the meeting was called, still the workers voted against. They were desperate to get the deal through; next the union delegates physically took the ballot boxes around to workers in the factory demanding that they cast their vote while still working. They claimed that this was done so as not disrupt production at the time."

As a result of such measures, four of Ford's five workplace divisions covered by the EBA signed on. The skilled tradespersons remain opposed.

Having failed to intimidate this section of the workforce, the unions scrambled not to lose control of the situation and coordinated this month's industrial action. The workers, members of the AMWU and Electrical Trades Union (ETU), first struck on May 10 and established pickets outside the Broadmeadows and Geelong plants. This was authorised industrial action, and the unions complied with Fair Work Australia procedures, including providing advance notice to the company of the precise locations and times of the work stoppages.

Production at the two Ford plants continued during the strike. The unions instructed their members in other company divisions, including production workers and metal tradespersons, not to join the industrial action. No other section of the working class was mobilised. As far as the ETU and AMWU were concerned, the strike served to let off some steam, diverting the workers and buying the bureaucracy some time to work behind the scenes to devise with Ford some means of implementing the agreement.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with workers protesting outside the Broadmeadows plant. “When the company is going well, there’s an excuse,” one said. “When they are going down the gurgler, there’s an excuse. It is always the workers on the ground who suffer... As for the Rudd government—for the first time I am not going to vote Labor. Rudd is worse than the Liberals—he won’t admit what he is doing. There’s no change for the better—we’ve been sold a dud... The news doesn’t get out. The news that WorkChoices hasn’t been changed doesn’t get out. People on the street think that it has disappeared.”

Another worker also denounced Labor’s industrial relations system. “Fair Work Australia is not working out too well at all,” he said. “It feels as though we’re going backwards. We had the devil we knew, and now what we’ve got is worse. They’ve made it even harder to strike. Just to take action today, we had to go through ballots and it took weeks. The company used to try to stop us striking, but now it is worse. I know you can get a lot of fines.”

Another authorised strike was held on May 18, though without any pickets or protests. Negotiations are continuing. The AMWU’s Ian Jones told the WSWWS today that the skilled tradespersons would be presented with yet another ballot next week. He acknowledged that the proposed EBA was “pretty much exactly the same” as the previous one rejected by the workers, though with some concessions on the hiring of apprentices and use of contract labour.

The Ford workers’ struggle in defence of their wages and conditions has locked them in confrontation not just with Ford but also with the trade unions, which function as industrial policemen on behalf of the corporations, and the Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. Labor’s draconian industrial relations regime forms part of a wider right-wing agenda being implemented on behalf of big business and finance capital.

Hundreds of jobs in the car industry have been destroyed under the Rudd government. Workers have been told they must make sacrifices—wage cuts, production speed ups, and forced time off during production shut downs—to maintain the companies’ competitiveness. Yet the senior CEOs and corporate investors have sacrificed nothing. Ford Australia returned a \$13 million profit last year, reversing several consecutive years in the red. The profit came despite a 7 percent plunge in sales and was generated by increased federal and state government subsidies and cost-cutting restructuring measures.

Every round of mass layoffs at Ford and other car companies has been implemented with the assistance of the trade unions, which work to pre-emptively sabotage any defence of jobs and instead deliver yet another “orderly closure” of plants and productive capacity.

To prevent this present struggle being sold out and sabotaged by the AMWU and ETU, Ford’s skilled tradespersons must form rank and file committees, independent of the trade unions, electing trusted workers to develop the campaign. Links must be established with other sections of the working class—in the first instance with the 60,000 workers in the vehicle and components industry nationally who have faced an onslaught of job losses, shift cuts, and attacks on wages. This must be the first step towards unifying the struggles of Ford and other car workers in the US, Europe, Asia, and internationally—all of whom face similar pressures under the drive for ever higher corporate profit rates.

Such a strategy requires a new political orientation based on a socialist program to reorganise society to meet the pressing needs of working people, not the profits of the wealthy few. That includes placing the banks and major corporations like Ford under democratic public control. Ford workers must make a conscious break with the unions and the Labor Party and fight to build a new mass internationalist and socialist party—the Socialist Equality Party.



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