

# PPG workers speak to the World Socialist Web Site

Our reporters  
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The WSWs spoke to a number of the 120 workers who have been on strike for more than seven weeks at a PPG Industries plant in eastern Melbourne. All of them opposed the two-tier wage structure that has already been accepted by the union, United Voice, and were deeply concerned about its implications (see: “Australia: Union prepares sell-out of PPG paint workers”). Hostile to the role of the union and the Labor government, they were searching for a way forward.

One worker said: “If we accept the two-tier we’re going to start a chain reaction for other companies. A lot of other companies are looking at what is happening at PPG and will take it as an example. Under the two-tier, we [the existing workers] are going to be targeted. Whether it is in six months, or two years time, we’ll be out. They are not going to pay us when they have people working at \$18 an hour.”

He warned of likely victimisations, saying: “We have the toolbox meetings once a week, where concerns are raised in the cell [production team]. We agree to wear our protective clothes ... Then if we get caught without safety glasses in the factory, they can dismiss us on the spot. People have to be aware what can happen.”

He continued: “With the two tier system—the future is at stake. Victoria used to be a manufacturing state—now look at it. Young people are stuffed, they won’t be able to buy a house, they won’t be able to have a future, have a family. I was talking to a lot of my other friends last night and showing them the [WSWS] article, and I told them ‘your children are going to be stuffed.’

“The company broke the last EBA [enterprise

bargaining agreement] so many times. They found a loophole in the wording of the EBA, which said there could not be casuals. Their lawyers changed the definition to ‘contractors,’ which weren’t mentioned in our EBA—so they could bring in casuals, claiming they were contractors. Now they want to have the two-tier in the new EBA... The union has turned on us and put the two-tier in without us even having a proper vote on it.”

He concluded: “In Australia people have got no more faith in Labor. They are not helping workers at all. A lot of people are asking this question, a lot of workers are asking it.”

A second striker explained: “The company wants to drive down the cost of our labour, but management are not interested in having their own wages driven down. Look at [PPG CEO Charles] Bunch—he earns \$14 million a year and flies around in some jet. His workers are trying to survive to the next pay cheque... Look at the cost of living we’re facing, it’s ridiculous. Internally, the company is trying to drive down costs, but externally we’re still exposed to the rising cost of living.

“I think no matter how you protest, how do you defend living standards, with prices for groceries, fuel, bills? How do you take on a corporation like PPG? We have no comeback. Look at the [industrial relations] legislation—they can just tear up EBAs. The shocking reality is that we can argue to the nth degree, but what can we do? How is the government allowing the companies to do it? Look at what is going on at Qantas—we’re facing the same sort of horse. And last week the union at Qantas backed down from threatened

strike action.”

Another worker said: “Fifteen years ago we had a fight. Nowadays it is a bigger fight. It is international. United States PPG is looking at this place in particular. They want to keep this place open a little while longer, but the cost of labour is a problem to them... Here we are told to take a cut in wages, but the cost of living is going through the roof.”

This worker thought there must be “balance” in the government. “But the Labor government is throwing dirt at the people. Salaries are going down, and the cost of living is going up... The whole system is falling apart. PPG is not going to take away the two-tier. The big bosses over in the US are putting on the pressure.”

A fourth striker said: “This dispute has meant that my whole view on things has been shattered. Management doesn’t equal the company. They are hired to look after the company. They are as good or as bad as any other worker.

“This company is not doing the right thing in any manner, shape or form. Their big picture is only concerned with their own self-interest. I’ve always believed there was a balance—workers, supply, customers, management. I thought the better work the worker did, the better the company would be, and everyone would be better off.

“I have spelled out the implications of the two-tier wages system. The more you look at it, the worse it gets. There is a domino effect—one [workforce] goes down and then more dominoes will fall. That is what is going to happen; it will be a cumulative effect.

“Now they are cutting their own safety rules. The (contractors) are tipping [paint] jobs directly into the mixer, whereas they made us pump them, which takes much longer. It will hurt our suppliers, it will hurt our customers. Manufacturing will be driven out of Australia.

“As for the unions, their role was usually to advocate for the worker. Ideally they would be biased toward the worker, because the government was biased toward the

company. I know the unions are involved with the Labor government. Labor is the union party. But the unions should be solely for the workers.

“Now I see that the union, the government and the management are in collaboration against us. I believe the Labor government should not be against the workers. But all three parties—Labor government, union and management—are against the workers. You can see that happening right now.”



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