

Australia: Wollongong residents denounce BlueScope sackings

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Virtually everyone you meet on the streets of Wollongong, one of Australia's main industrial cities, is affected by BlueScope Steel's plan to eliminate at least 1,130 jobs at the city's Port Kembla steelworks. Together with working people in the Victorian town of Hastings, where some 300 jobs are to be axed, thousands of workers, their families and wider layers in flow-on industries face the destruction of their livelihoods and futures.

The human and social impact will be enormous in Wollongong, where the steelworks has been the centrepiece of the local economy and employment prospects since it was built in 1928 and acquired by Broken Hill Proprietary (now BHP Billiton) in 1935. By the 1970s, the sprawling plant employed nearly 30,000 workers and contractors. If the job cuts announced last week are allowed to proceed, there will be only about 2,000 employees left.

During the post-World War II period, migrants came from all over Europe, South America and the world to find work in the steel plant and associated industries. By 1966, about 60 percent of the wage earners at the steelworks were born overseas, coming from 70 different countries. Port Kembla became the largest single concentration of heavy industry in Australia—include a fertiliser plant, copper smelter, locomotive workshop, coal export shipping terminal, grain export shipping terminal and industrial gases plant.

Massive job cuts began in the early 1980s, and accelerated under the steel restructuring plans of the previous Labor governments of Hawke and Keating from 1983 to 1996, which were enforced by the trade unions. In 2002, BHP Billiton, having run down the plant and extracted every last ounce of profit it could from the workforce, formed a spin-off company, originally named BHP Steel, and later BlueScope Steel, to take over the steel operations.

In effect, BHP Billiton washed its hands of the steelworks and its employees, calculating that the ageing plant was doomed under conditions of globalised steel making. The accumulated profits from the Port Kembla complex—as well as its two other steelworks in Newcastle, New South Wales, and Whyalla, South Australia—laid the basis for BHP Billiton to emerge as the largest miner in the world.

Continuing their decades-long record of collaboration with

the company, the steel industry trade unions are now appealing to BlueScope Steel to increase its redundancy package, in order to pressure enough “volunteers” into accepting retrenchment so that the management can achieve its 1,130 target (see: “Steel unions appeal for deal to impose BlueScope sackings”). Yet it is clear, from talking to residents of Warrawong, a suburban centre just south of the steelworks, that the job losses, whether “voluntary” or not, will devastate the region.

Among the workers set to lose their jobs is Paul Galea, who has worked in the coal preparation plant for three decades since migrating from Malta. He denounced BHP Billiton, which had just announced a record \$22.5 billion profit. “We worked for them for so many years,” he told the WWSW, “and now they are making huge profits while the workers are being gotten rid of.”

Galea had no confidence in the trade unions to fight the job cuts. Over the years they had repeatedly implemented company demands for productivity speed-ups, such as the introduction of 12-hour shifts, claiming that the changes were necessary if workers were to retain their jobs. “There’ll be no help from the unions,” he insisted. “They’re TV stars only. We only ever see them talking on TV.”

Daniel, a young Patrick Stevedoring worker on the Port Kembla wharves, said he would be among the 200 dock workers to lose their jobs once BlueScope Steel stopped exporting steel. He explained that he would be one of the first to go, because he was employed as a casual, having been hired eight months ago. Of the 2,000 or so Patrick employees at Port Kembla and Botany (Sydney), he estimated that up to 700 were casual. With three young children, he and his wife faced an uncertain future.

George, a rigger and former contract employee at the steelworks, said he had stopped working the plant about seven years ago because of the deteriorating working conditions. “I was working with unskilled riggers. People were coming in with all these labour-hire firms that were doing deals with the steelworks, and I wasn’t getting enough work. Skills were not

appreciated any more.”

Asked about the role of the unions, he said with disgust: “The unions say they are for the workers, but I never saw it—even though I paid my fees and went to all the rallies and strikes and supported them.”

George said he had lived in the area since the 1960s, when his family migrated from Europe.

“In the old days, there was plenty of work, and you could have a secure job, or pick up casual work. People came from all over the place to work here, and found opportunities here. The whole culture has changed. Before there used to be a working middle class; now there will be only two classes: the rich and an underclass, who will feel like they failed.”

Now in his 50s, George lamented the plight of younger generations. “It’s sad—I just don’t know what the future is for young people now—ask [Prime Minister] Julia Gillard, maybe she knows!”

Ethan, an unemployed 20-year-old, said he had hoped to apply for an apprenticeship at the steelworks, but not any more. What was happening was “horrible.” Since leaving school, he had been looking for four years for an apprenticeship, perhaps in the electrical trades, or any other kind of work.

As for the claims of BHP Billiton and the government that workers could find alternative employment in the mines of Western Australia, he said: “I couldn’t go to work in the mines, with three kids and one on the way.”

Asked about Prime Minister Gillard’s statement that BlueScope’s job shedding was part of a necessary economic “transition,” Ethan commented: “People are losing their jobs and can’t support their families. Since she came in, all this has happened. They should stop what they’re doing.”

Ivanka Herceg, who works for the Big W retail chain, said her brother, who was now 45, had worked in the steelworks since he was 16. Employed in the number 6 blast furnace, he would definitely lose his job, and this would have serious implications for his family.

“It will change their lives,” she said, adding that her brother was not the only one. “He is foreman over there and he has to tell his workers that they are all in the same boat. It is a disaster for Wollongong. A lot of families will be destroyed by this—losing their jobs, losing their homes, and everything else. A lot of other businesses, including retail, will suffer as well. Everyone will be affected in a way.”

Commenting on the Labor government’s support for the

company, which has included rewarding it with \$100 million in early compensation for the government’s proposed carbon tax, Herceg said: “The government should try to get more jobs, create more jobs, for these people. We all thought Labor would do better for us. They are not doing much for hard-working people are they?”

Herceg was also concerned about the future for younger generations. “It’s definitely affecting young people, and a lot of them are also losing their jobs in retail too because of the introduction of automatic checkout machines. To be honest, I don’t see a good future for young people.”

In many families, parents and teenagers are both affected. Interviewed at the Wollongong Technical and Further Education (TAFE) college, where he is studying to be a chef, Brandon Child, 16, said: “My dad’s a truck driver—he’s got nine trucks now—and he’s been one of the ones who’ve been sacked ... so that’s affected my family extremely and I just don’t like it. I find it disgusting.

“He’s got to now look for work to get all his trucks and all his employees to get new jobs, or help them find jobs, or re-employ them somewhere else. For people that have been working there for 20 odd, 30 odd years, they now have to go and find a new profession to go into. It’s just not how it’s meant to be. For a country that’s so lucky, I don’t find it very lucky at the moment.

“People can’t go out to eat dinner at fancy restaurants, so how can people like my peers and I go out and get jobs? I’ve been looking for about two years now. People just can’t put me on, because their restaurant’s going down as well.”

“They say we’re out of global recession but obviously we’re not. America’s going down, China’s going down, the Asian continent is going down. I think we’ll follow in their footsteps very soon.”

The author also recommends:

“Oppose the BlueScope sackings! Fight for a socialist strategy to defend steel and manufacturing jobs”

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact