

Newcastle residents voice concern about BlueScope job losses

Our correspondents
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The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to people in the Newcastle area, north of Sydney, about the recent decision by BlueScope Steel to close down its export division and destroy 1,400 jobs in Wollongong and Hastings.

They recalled their own experiences following the 1999 closure of the BHP steel plant in Newcastle, which was at the heart of manufacturing for the area. BHP subsequently spun off its steelmaking in Wollongong and other centres to separate companies—BlueScope and OneSteel.

Phil worked in the administration at BHP Steel all of his working life. He started at the company in Newcastle as a 16-year-old in 1965 and was there until the plant closed.

He commented on the impact of the Newcastle closure and expressed concern about the latest BlueScope decision: “I think Wollongong and the region there depends even more heavily on the presence of BlueScope than Newcastle did on the BHP plant. There is just nothing there that is going to fill the hole left by BlueScope. There is already very high unemployment in the Wollongong area, especially among young people. Young workers made redundant from the plant will most probably have to move out of the area for any possibility of finding employment.

“Like BHP in Newcastle, there would also be a lot of older workers at BlueScope who have been there for most of their working life. There was a large pool of people in the over-50 age bracket at the BHP plant at

time of the 1999 closure.

“When the plant closed most of these were unable to find work and so they just had to retire. This was only possible because of the high redundancy payout offered by the company, but this was exceptional. Others simply vanished onto welfare benefits, and most probably never found full-time work again. Employers just don’t hire older people.

“There is no doubt that BHP had its reasons for increasing the redundancy package. They wanted to ensure that they did not have any industrial action or any other problems up to the time of the complete closure, and the extra money did help prevent that. You will never again see companies pay out such large amounts and I don’t think it is going to be the case at BlueScope.

“BHP also made millions available at the time for retraining schemes. This was going to open up new job opportunities. When you look at the actual results you have to ask was the money wasted. How many jobs did retraining actually provide? I do not think it provided many at all.

“Look at the Steel River industrial estate that BHP set up, which was supposed to create around 2,000 jobs. It was a complete failure. It never provided the jobs claimed and it was never going to. Look around the estate today there are only a handful of small industries there. I would be very surprised if BHP did not realise that this was going to be the case but it did give the impression that there was something there for the future.

“There are not a lot of long-term full-time jobs on offer for young people in Newcastle or elsewhere. Retail has been affected badly by the global crisis. Manufacturing is also affected by the high Australian dollar. The concept of a job for life no longer exists. If you tell young people today that you worked for a single company for all your working life they look at you dumb struck. They cannot imagine that and will never experience it. For them a job for life is not a reality.”

Robert Williams lives in Newcastle. While he was able at one time to find work as a labourer, he has now been unemployed for two years. He said the last job he had was in cleaning, but he left because his contract employer was not paying him for all the hours he worked. Williams described the BlueScope sackings as “a disgrace.”

“Why don’t they sack the management?” he asked. “Why should the workers have to suffer? Where are the unions in all of this? It’s not good enough to get a redundancy package. They should be fighting to save jobs, not bargaining with the boss to cut them.

“The sackings there are going to cause a lot of family stress and conflict. Being unemployed is like having a disease—it destroys your self esteem and confidence. There is nothing worse than being on the dole.”

Speaking about his own experiences, Williams said that the unemployed do not get enough support and described the assistance offered to those on Newstart benefits as “hopeless”.

“They give you some training, but the agencies can’t find you a decent job. Any jobs they find are mostly with contractors who usually don’t pay the correct wages and the jobs are only temporary.”

Williams slammed the Labor Party, saying any claim that it was “a champion for workers was rubbish.” He continued: “The rot set in under the Hawke-Keating Labor governments [in the 1980s and 1990s]. It got rid of a lot of jobs and sold workers out. Look what they did to the airline pilots when they went on strike. Labor brought in the air force as scabs and did them in.

“I voted Labor all my working life, but I don’t now. I was in various unions in each job I did, but I wouldn’t join one now. They are only interested in getting your regular dues.”

Virginia, a retail worker who spoke to the WSWS in the centre of Newcastle, said she was extremely concerned about the job losses at BlueScope.

“I believe the BlueScope sackings will have repercussions for all workers,” she explained. “It highlights the vulnerability of your job. Most people don’t know from one day to the next if they will have a job. Jobs these days are not secure. In retail, I know that if I don’t work hard and give it all I will lose my job. People are expected to be more flexible and multi-skilled but are not compensated for this.

“I think the BlueScope sackings are just the beginning and the effect will be far-reaching. Irrespective of the reason for jobs going, I think there should be more support for these workers. There should be proper retraining schemes with no loss of pay. I think the government should do this and create new jobs. You can’t leave it to the employers.”



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