

Australia: BlueScope job cuts begin in Hastings

Our reporters
6 September 2011

Within days of BlueScope Steel announcing that 200 workers and dozens of contractors would lose their jobs at the Western Port steel plant in Hastings, on the Mornington Peninsula about 70 kilometres from Melbourne, smaller companies in the area were preparing their own sackings.

BlueScope, with a workforce of more than 1,000 at the Hastings site, is among the largest employers on the peninsula. Its former owner, BHP, began processing steel at the site in 1972, taking advantage of a protected deep water port and ample land for expansion. Steel slabs from the Port Kembla steelworks in Wollongong are unloaded and transferred into the Hastings plant for further processing. The product is exported and also used by various steel fabrication industries in the Melbourne area.

One such operation is the BlueScope Lysaghts factory in nearby Dandenong South, which produces colour bond roofing. A worker at the plant told the WSWs last week that the management had laid off all its casuals as part of the company's cost-cutting across its operations. He expected that full-time jobs would be axed in the coming weeks.

A waterside worker from Hastings told the WSWs on Saturday that wharfies had received redundancy letters from their employer, Patricks Stevedores, the day before. BlueScope had operated the ship, the Iron Monarch, to carry about one million tonnes of steel slab each year from Port Kembla. Earlier this year, the ship underwent a \$17 million upgrade in Singapore. It is now being mothballed due to the closure of the Hastings hot strip mill, leading to the job cuts at the wharf.

Workers in Hastings said that Jack Thompson Engineering, which provides maintenance services for

BlueScope, has also retrenched staff. There are rumours that another company, Crib Point Engineering, is planning to do so as well. Local cafe owners explained that the loss of clientele could lead to the loss of hours or jobs for their staff.

The scaling down of BlueScope's steel production next month will have a major impact throughout the region. Engineering shops, building industry suppliers and warehouses dot the highway from Melbourne's south eastern suburb of Frankston through the peninsula towns of Somerville, Tyabb, Hastings and Bittern. The majority of people in the area are employed as technical and trade workers, labourers, machine operators and drivers, and clerical and sales staff.

Official unemployment in the region stood at 5.4 percent in mid-2011. It will climb sharply as a result of BlueScope's downsizing. Employment on the peninsula had already been affected by the January 2010 fire that destroyed the Ingham Chicken processing plant in Somerville. Some 370 workers were laid off and 270 compelled to take work at other sites. The plant has now reopened, but employs less staff than before the fire.

The WSWs spoke with local residents about the impact of the BlueScope lay-offs.

Geoff, a retired worker, said: "I worked there [at BlueScope] over 32 years as a storeman. I left three years ago. As far as the hot mill closing, I think it's been planned a long time. They tried to close the whole joint a while ago, but they kept it going. This was five years ago.

"Workers should be fighting against the sackings; it will hurt the town like anything. How come it's always 'yes' from the union? Why were we not told before? I have

seen Hastings grow. If they shut it [the plant] down there will be a lot of shops shutting. Those workers up in Port Kembla are even worse off.”

Bruce, who works for Chelgrave, a maintenance contractor for BlueScope, said he was concerned that much of his type of work would be casualised. “I think BHP is just as much to blame as anybody else. They saw this coming. They joined up with Billiton and sold off their steel sector to BlueScope.

“They send everything offshore. When the Chinese people get better educated and get better money, the companies will go to India. Look at the companies we’re dealing with. Look at [the 2010 ousting of former prime minister] Rudd. The mining companies think they’re dealing with a football coach not the prime minister!

“As for the unions, I haven’t seen them doing a hell of a lot for the last 20 or 30 years. They used to be militant and did something to defend jobs, but they don’t now. The unions are like political parties, half of them, the way they behave.”

Andrea Boyd, a mother with three small children, said: “The BlueScope job cuts are a bit stressful. I know a few people affected by it. We’ve lived here 12 years. It is a growing area, but this will have a very bad effect. It is not just the immediate people losing their jobs who are affected. This will mean uprooting whole families.

“My husband is a technician—he checks on welds for cracks and deterioration. He works at Orygen at Lang Lang, but he also has to work away quite a bit. He has to go to Port Campbell (200 kilometres away). Sometimes he is supposed to go and work in Papua New Guinea, but he refuses. There is a lot of that sort of thing, and these job cuts will make it even harder for people.”

A Patricks Stevedores worker said: “A week ago, they told us our jobs were OK. Exports had died off since the global financial crisis, but they said they would focus more on the domestic market. There are 50 of us, about 20 casuals.

“We are being offered transfers, say to Sydney container terminals, but that is not much use. We’ve been sent a two-page letter seeking voluntary redundancies first, but then they will start to pick heads. I don’t want to

see casualisation come in the way it has in the UK and Ireland. I’d like to see my job keep going.”

Matthew Fountain, 30, said: “I’m job-seeking now. I feel sorry for those BlueScope people. I’ve previously done factory work. I do painting with powder coating, and there is not much work around here. It has pretty much dried up. I will do anything I can get my hands on, but I haven’t got a licence, and that doesn’t help. I do part-time tree lopping sometimes. To find work, I’m going to have to move to Melbourne.

“I don’t agree with any of this. I don’t like our current situation. They don’t give workers as many rights as they used to have. That is the main problem with today’s society—no workers’ rights.”

Rob Smith, a self-employed panel beater, said: “I’ve been a panel beater for 20 years. We’re trying to start our own small business. We moved here from Mornington four years ago, because it was a growing community with a lot to offer. With the BlueScope jobs going, people will disappear from here. We will lose all the skilled workers. The problem, as I see it, is the fat cats up the top.”

The Socialist Equality Party is calling on workers and young people to oppose the job destruction now underway and has outlined a political perspective to defend the interests of the working class. To discuss these issues we urge workers and residents in the Hastings area to attend our public meeting, “Fight the Steel Sackings,” to be held at the Hastings Community Hall, 3 High Street, Hastings, on Sunday, September 18 at 2 p.m.



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