

Australia: Steel workers in Hastings kept in the dark as layoffs hit

Our correspondents
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BlueScope steel workers in Hastings, Victoria, like their counterparts at the Port Kembla steel plant, are being kept entirely in the dark as company executives and trade union bureaucrats finalise arrangements to lay off at least 200 permanent employees and dozens of contractors.

A mass meeting of union members was held inside the Hastings plant late last month. As at a similar meeting held in Port Kembla on September 1, the trade unions sought to pre-empt any discussion of a struggle in defence of jobs by instead focussing on the redundancy packages being offered by BlueScope. Since then, there has been no discussion organised by the unions, and little or no information on what is happening has been provided to the workers.

World Socialist Web Site reporters recently spoke with BlueScope workers in Hastings, as well as family members and friends of other workers—no-one had a clear understanding about what was happening with the redundancies, and workers in one division of the plant had not been told about the situation in other sections.

The situation underscores the critical role played by the Australian Workers Union (AWU) and Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) in collaborating with BlueScope executives and Labor government ministers in enforcing the job destruction. The ruthless operation that is being carried out against the steel workers in Hastings and Port Kembla foreshadows what is being prepared against the entire working class as the government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard spearheads a restructuring drive aimed at boosting the international competitiveness of Australian capitalism by lowering wages, tearing up conditions and eliminating jobs.

In Hastings, a town in the Mornington Peninsula just outside of Melbourne, virtually everyone has a family member, friend, or neighbour who is employed by BlueScope Steel. Around 7,000 people live in Hastings, while the BlueScope plant, in operation since 1972, employs about 1,000 workers, though not all live in the immediate area.

The announced job losses at BlueScope centre on the hot strip mill, which is to be shut down. The WSWs has learned that several workers have already received compulsory redundancy notices, belying claims made by union officials that the job cuts would be delivered through voluntary redundancies. One worker also reported that some workers at the hot strip mill were being shifted to replace workers in other sections of the plant.

The AWU's site delegate Robbie Rudd has admitted that the sackings will not be confined to the hot strip mill crews. He told the local *Western Port Weekly* newspaper: "We still don't know the full extent of the job losses at the moment, but it's not going to be as straight forward as it sounded."

If the steel sackings proceed without challenge, many more jobs in connecting industries and small businesses will be destroyed.

Job losses have already been reported in some of the steel fabrication industries that use the BlueScope-processed steel. Several waterside workers have received redundancy notices from Patricks Stevedores, because of reduced steel shipments from Hastings. Few of the sacked workers will be able to find work in the area. The *Western Port Weekly* last week reported that BlueScope had been contacted by mining companies and others interested in hiring the laid off workers, but "few if any of the jobs are in Victoria, let alone the Mornington Peninsula".

One worker at the plant, who did not want to be named, told the WSWs yesterday: "The whole thing is a disgrace. Nobody really knows what is going on."

He continued: "We had one mass meeting, but nothing came out of that. We were just told, 'Sorry boys, this is the way it is.' The union is hoping enough people will put up their hand [and take a voluntary redundancy payout]. A few blokes I know then said, 'Oh, well, I'm taking the package.' I don't think too many people weren't all for the money. But no-one is happy about it. It is older blokes going for the package—but in the long-term, I think they'll find out what it really means to be

unemployed.”

The WSWs also spoke with other Hastings residents.

Alan Smithson said: “I work in the steel industry and we use BlueScope [steel products]; we make aerators for sewerage farms. There are about ten of us working there. We have spoken about what’s happened at BlueScope—a bloke I work with, his dad is at the plant and has been laid off. It is affecting a lot of people and their families.”

Asked about the Gillard government, Alan replied, “I never vote, because I don’t believe in encouraging them. They do nothing to help me.”

Dan, a pensioner, explained: “I know a lot of blokes from BlueScope from the footy club. If a bloke is 43 years old, and paying off a mortgage, how is he going to go? He’s knackered. As it is, if you only have one wage coming in, you can’t pay off the bills.

“Already dozens of shops have closed down—they’re vacant ... As for politicians, they’re all in business. So Julia [Gillard] says we’re all moving forward! In reality we’re all stepping backwards at the moment.”

Joan, a retired office worker, was also hostile towards the Labor government: “Politicians! They’re ineffectual. What’s your preference? It stinks. All the money comes from the global multinational companies and the big media press. There won’t be any middle layers left soon, everybody is being pushed downwards.”

Greg, a transport worker, said: “I think everyone will be selling their own homes, it will be affecting everyone in the community. I think it is going to hit us badly. I’ve got three grandkids, I’m worried about their future. Already young people are afraid to buy a home, they just can’t afford it. They can’t afford to save at all. You get a 25-year mortgage, but if two years in, you lose your job then you will lose everything.

“Superannuation is being whittled away by big companies. When industry super schemes were made compulsory in the 1980s, they were completely different when they were first offered to us. We were told they were “non profit”. Now they are run by multi-millionaires and they won’t help you. It is true that the unions have done very well, for example from CBUS [the construction unions’ superannuation fund].

“My girlfriend has worked in aged care for 20 years. They always have to stand up for themselves over working conditions and pay. She is coming up to 50, and she is very worried about the future ... I don’t like anybody in parliament.

We need to get people in there who are for us.”

Barbara said: “I feel sorry for the ones working at BlueScope. My brother has been there for years. If you work in the hot strip mill then you’re out. There are some really good workers there. It’s all about money, everybody knows that. That is the way the world is at the moment.

“My brother is financially stable, his home is paid for and his kids have grown up. But of course he won’t be able to find another job now. He has been happy there at Bluescope, although I don’t know how he put up with the shift work.

“My husband is a truck driver. My son works for an engineering place, and 50 percent of their work comes from BlueScope. So this involves everybody, it will have a ripple effect ... I feel the most for my son. He and his family are just starting out, what is going to happen to them?”

Barbara continued: “We do need to fight to keep the wages up, and I believe penalty rates are important. I used to be a union representative in nursing, fighting to keep penalty rates, and it was an uphill job against [former Victorian state premier] Jeff Kennett ... Gillard is another story! She has shown her true colours over the carbon tax. Before we voted she said there would be no carbon tax. It is a bit rough to turn round, like she has, and do a back flip. Anyway, they are all as bad as each other. They’re not the ones doing the work ...”

The Socialist Equality Party is calling on workers and young people to oppose the job destruction now underway. We urge residents to participate in the discussion at our public meeting that has been called to advance a socialist perspective in the interests of the working class.

Fight axing of BlueScope steel jobs!
Hastings Community Hall, 3 High Street
Sunday, September 18, 2 p.m.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact