

Rolling strikes continue at Toyota Australia

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More than 3,000 Toyota Australia workers went on strike again last Thursday and Friday against the company's attempt to cut real wages. Rolling stoppages have been imposed, with a total of five days' production lost at Toyota's assembly plant, in the Melbourne suburb of Altona, and at parts warehouses in Melbourne and Sydney.

Toyota is demanding that workers accept a new enterprise agreement that involves four annual wage increases totalling 11 percent, with the first rise just 2 percent. The official annual cost of living is currently 4.5 percent. Workers have not received any pay increase since April 2010. Moreover, after the 2008 financial crash production was slashed and workers were given fewer hours and less money. Toyota Australia also operated on half shifts for two months after this year's Japanese earthquake and tsunami, with workers receiving only 75 percent of their standard wage.

The company is now seeking to erode workers' base rates of pay and further escalate productivity, in line with the onslaught on wages and conditions that is being conducted by the major auto companies around the world. In the US, for example, General Motors and the United Auto Workers union are attempting to ram through a four-year agreement entrenching two-tiered poverty wages. In India, 3,000 Maruti Suzuki workers are fighting against a month-long lockout, while in France, several hundred car components workers are on strike against a 23 percent wage cut.

The struggle being waged by Toyota Australia workers is now in serious danger, with the trade unions determined to shut down all industrial action and work with the company to ram through the enterprise agreement. As in the US and other countries, the unions

have worked hand in hand with the companies and federal and state governments for decades to enforce the shutdown of plants, destruction of jobs, and imposition of productivity speedups and wage freezes. Total production in the Australian car industry is now at its lowest point since 1957.

The Australia Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) have said they want Toyota to deliver three annual wage increases of 4 percent, only marginally higher than the company's offer. In fact, there is no disagreement between the executives and the bureaucrats.

Behind closed doors, discussions were held last week, before the two-day strike, under the auspices of the Labor government's Fair Work Australia (FWA) industrial tribunal. Toyota said it would deliver its total wage increase of 11 percent three months quicker than first proposed—though this was conditional on new and unspecified productivity demands related to absenteeism and attendance. The *Australian* reported: "The company was confident the offer would be endorsed by senior union officials, but it was rejected by employee representatives."

A delegates meeting was held last Wednesday and the proposal was voted down, reflecting considerable opposition among ordinary workers to the proposed union sell-out.

A large proportion of the 3,000 workers at Toyota's Altona plant are immigrants, many from East Asia and India. Generally younger than the workforces at Australia's other car plants, many Toyota workers receive an average weekly wage of only about \$800.

One worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "We

feel that every year we give up conditions. We accepted their deals. Now we feel that they have to accept what we want. It's not that we're asking for the world, but just to pay the bills. It's the [increased] cost of living that has affected us. Most of us feel that. Some of the people at the plant have had to get second jobs just to stay afloat. I'm willing to keep fighting now, that's how I see it."

Another explained: "We needed a lot of overtime to have a decent wage. I know that about 100 people were given redundancy packages recently. I think they want to get rid of the oldest workers who can't work fast anymore. The young people that replace them are mainly on contracts."

A young worker added: "We've got money problems—it's really hard to live nowadays. It's becoming impossible to buy a house, and the cost of living goes up. We won't be able to retire."

The unions have done everything possible to keep the workers in the dark and restrict their struggle to the narrowest possible confines. No mass meeting has been called to discuss the issues, and pickets were not formed on the five days the workers struck. The industrial action has been conducted within Labor's draconian FWA regime. The FWA tribunal banned planned strikes on September 8 and 9, and the unions complied without challenge. No further authorised strike action has been applied for, clearly pointing to the bureaucracy's determination to shut down the dispute.

Having proven unable to ram the proposed agreement through via the delegates, Toyota is now preparing to conduct its own secret ballot of the workforce. It hopes to divide different sections of workers and secure majority acceptance through intimidation and threats. CEO Max Yasuda declared the workers' actions could see Toyota shift its manufacturing operations offshore. The company claims that the five strike days have cost \$50 million in lost sales, triggered stand downs in component supply plants, and forced it to delay the launch of a new Camry model car.

The unions are clearly involved in this campaign.

Acting national secretary of the AMWU's vehicles division Dave Smith declared that while he does not expect the company ballot to succeed, "when all is said and done, it's the employees' choice about which way they vote and that's the way it should be."

In order to take their struggle forward and defend their independent interests, Toyota workers have to make a break with the trade unions and establish their own rank and file committees. Workers need to turn out other sections of the working class confronting similar attacks—including BlueScope Steel workers, Qantas employees, striking Jeld-Wen door and window manufacturing workers, and public sector workers—on the basis of developing a political struggle against the Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard, which established the FWA legislation to straitjacket workers and is spearheading the further pro-business restructuring of Australian capitalism.

Car workers in Australia, along with their brothers and sisters internationally, must adopt a new perspective that fights to unite all working people in a common struggle for the socialist reorganisation of society, where human needs are given priority over corporate profit. This would involve removing car manufacturing and other key giant corporations from private ownership and transforming them into public-owned, democratically controlled enterprises. Only in this way can workers combat the "race to the bottom," where workers in every country are pitted against one other.



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