

# Toyota Australia sacks 350 workers

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Toyota Australia yesterday and today sacked 350 workers, about 10 percent of its workforce, from its plant in the western Melbourne suburb of Altona. Security guards were present inside and outside the factory to oversee the entire process.

The layoffs were announced last January, but suddenly began to be enforced yesterday. Without any notice, workers were pulled off assembly lines and work areas mid-shift, escorted by security guards, and taken in vans to a nearby convention centre hired by Toyota. Those laid off were told that they failed to meet select “performance” criteria relating to absenteeism, punctuality, safety, clothing and attitude.

Workers at the plant who spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* unanimously reported that Toyota management targeted workers, including occupational health and safety representatives and some union delegates, who had spoken up for the rights of their colleagues and resisted some of the company’s demands. Workers who had been injured at the plant, submitted WorkCover claims and were on light duties, were also allegedly singled out.

The sackings have all the hallmarks of a calculated provocation, designed to intimidate the entire workforce ahead of management demands for further job losses and productivity speedups. They also set a precedent for other companies to use similar methods to target and dismiss “unproductive” or “troublesome” workers.

Several dozen security guards patrolled the outside the plant yesterday, including in car parks and at nearby traffic light intersections, with more inside the facility. A Toyota spokesman claimed that the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) had requested

the extra security during negotiations before the layoffs. AMWU officials denied this and stated that there was no need for the intimidating security presence.

The trade unions have functioned as the active accomplices of Toyota management in organising the mass layoffs. Speaking to the media outside the plant yesterday, Dave Smith, the assistant federal secretary of the AMWU’s vehicle division, made clear his agreement with the job cuts, only complaining that the company did not organise voluntary redundancies through the union. The union, Smith explained, had identified 170 workers who were willing to go, but less than 90 of these had been retrenched. “There’s a proper way to do this,” he declared. “They could have done it the right way, through voluntary redundancies.”

The AMWU announced that it might initiate a legal appeal to Fair Work Australia, the Labor government’s industrial relations tribunal, on behalf of the sacked workers. This is nothing but a diversion aimed at covering up the union’s role in the layoffs.

Late last year, the AMWU rammed through a regressive enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) covering the Toyota workers that centrally involved a significant real wage cut during the next four years. Workers staged rolling strikes over five days in September, and then twice rejected a proposed agreement put by the company. The EBA was only approved in the third ballot held—and even then a large minority, 45 percent, defied the AMWU and voted against the deal.

The 350 sackings are no doubt intended to ensure that there is no more resistance among the remaining workforce to the company’s restructuring plans. Many workers believe that further layoffs will be imposed by

September, including the possible elimination of the evening shift, a move that could see more than 1,000 jobs destroyed.

The global automotive industry is in severe crisis and every major producer is restructuring its international operations. Production in low-wage platforms in East Asia, India, Russia and Brazil continues to increase, while the Obama administration and the United Auto Workers have established new benchmarks for slashing workers' wages and conditions in the US and other advanced capitalist countries.

Annual production at Toyota's Altona plant is now less two-thirds what it was five years ago, and CEO Max Yasuda declared that this was now a "permanent situation."

The car companies in Australia, the trade unions, and the Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard have committed to ensuring the "international competitiveness" of the domestic car industry, at the expense of jobs, wages and conditions. Corporate management, union bureaucrats and government ministers collaborate through industry bodies and forums, working to ensure "orderly" arrangements for the next plant closure or round of job cuts.

Yesterday Workplace Relations Manager Bill Shorten cynically declared his sympathy for the sacked Toyota workers. "Those workers can turn around and face their families tonight and say, 'well, the government's got an employment coordinator, they're going to provide special assistance so that we can re-enter the workforce as soon as possible'," he said.

Sham pledges of "special assistance" means nothing to many of the laid-off workers, who will struggle to ever find work again. Some of the sacked Toyota employees are immigrants with limited English language skills, and others have worked at the Altona plant their entire working lives. Manufacturing is being decimated, with unemployment in Victoria the second highest of any Australian state.

One of the sacked workers, who asked not to be named, told the WSWs: "I have worked there 10 or 11

years. I was expecting to lose my job—they think I am a trouble maker, because I speak my mind. The company doesn't want people to do that. I spoke up on anything to do with the job. I didn't like to call the union in—they do the same thing as the company."

Other workers who kept their jobs also spoke with the WSWs. "This is the first time I've seen anything like this," one said, "and I've worked here 10 years. Some people who were here 20 years were treated like this. It shocked everybody the way they took people out, treating them like criminals... It is intimidation—to get what they want. They want to have less workers. They rave on about Toyota having a good reputation, and that these workers who lose their jobs will be picked up by other companies in the car industry. But the jobs are just not there—the situation is changing. Everybody is thinking about it. You lose a job now and that's it."

Another worker coming off the day shift told WSWs reporters that he was being watched by the company as he spoke and that management would probably call him in the next day to chastise him for discussing the situation. "This is the first time that it [sackings] has been done like this... The union is in agreement with the company. People are saying that some part of the [enterprise bargaining] agreement was changed at the last minute, but I don't know the details... Everybody is very disheartened, even those who are not affected. It is not just the car industry—it has to do with the government. I've worked in textiles and other industries before coming to Toyota, but I've never seen the decline of manufacturing like this."



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