

Ford Australia sacks 210 workers

Will Morrow
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Ford Australia yesterday sacked 212 workers from its Broadmeadows and Geelong plants, in the state of Victoria. With production suspended for the day, workers were called in for individual meetings with management to be told their fate.

Workers leaving the Broadmeadows plant in Melbourne told the *World Socialist Web Site* that the company had targeted employees based on their personal records, including numbers of sick days taken and whether they were identified as “troublemakers”. Many of those sacked had worked at Ford for more than 25 years, some for their entire working lives, and will now find it very difficult to secure other employment.

Ford announced in July that it was sacking 440 workers from its Victorian plants, but later reduced this to 330 after re-employing 110 workers in different positions. Ford worked with the trade unions to pressure workers into so-called voluntary redundancies, but only 118 workers accepted, reflecting growing concern about rising unemployment. Job destruction is accelerating across Australia as a result of the deepening global economic crisis, hitting manufacturing particularly hard. The official jobless rate in Broadmeadows is 16 percent, about three times the national average.

Ford’s sackings are part of a global restructuring drive pursued by all the major auto companies since the eruption of the global financial crisis in 2008. Last month, Ford announced it was closing down one of its plants in Genk, northern Belgium, destroying 4,600 positions and affecting another 5,000 jobs. The following day, Ford’s British division revealed it would shut its Transit factory in Southampton and a stamping plant in East London in 2013, destroying up

to 2,000 jobs.

In 2009, the Obama administration and the United Auto Workers union organised an agreement with General Motors and Chrysler which saw pay for new-hires slashed in half to \$14 per hour, along with other regressive concessions. This set the benchmark for the auto giants internationally, including in Europe and Australia.

The three Australian auto producers, General Motors Holden, Ford and Toyota, have sharply downsized their production in the past three years, with annual output dropping from 335,000 in 2007 to 220,000 last year. Ford axed 880 jobs in 2008 and another 240 in 2010. Earlier this year, Toyota sacked 350 workers, or 10 percent of its total workforce, from its Altona plant in Melbourne.

It is now widely expected that Ford will shut its Australian operations within a few years. Stephen Longley, a partner with PPB Advisory, a corporate receiver for auto component manufacturers, told Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio last month that companies in the auto supply chain were basing their operations on the assumption that Ford Australia would cease production by 2016. Ford has refused to outline any future operations beyond that year.

The closure of Ford’s Broadmeadows and Geelong plants would further devastate the surrounding working class communities. As well as the 2,900 workers employed by Ford, many more jobs in the car components sector depend on their output. The Federation of Automotive Product Manufacturers estimates that 5 percent of national manufacturing, or 45,000 jobs, is tied to the auto sector.

Federal Treasurer Wayne Swan feigned sympathy for the sacked workers yesterday, declaring that the Labor government would do “everything it possibly can” to assist them. The reality is that the government, along with the trade unions, has worked with Ford to organise the layoffs. Its multi-million dollar subsidies to the major car producers are premised on the companies working to boost their “international competitiveness” through job cuts and the lowering of workers’ conditions.

The Australian Manufacturing and Workers Union (AMWU) has worked hand in hand with Ford management to implement the sackings. The union bureaucrats function as another wing of the corporations, collaborating with the executives and Labor government ministers in every round of restructuring to ensure there is no resistance by workers.

AMWU vehicle division assistant federal secretary Dave Smith yesterday declared that the union had asked Ford to uphold “respect and dignity for the workers”, adding that he was “satisfied that they’ve tried pretty hard to make sure that workers are provided for.” He promoted the company’s provision of counsellors and the presence of officers from Centrelink, the government unemployment agency.

Many workers who spoke to the WSWS from their cars as they left the plant expressed disappointment or anger toward the union. John said: “I’ve worked here 17 years and I can’t get my job back. The union is not good enough. You put them in and pay them money, and they don’t do anything.”

Another worker who had retained his job said: “The union’s not doing enough to help us—they’re just there to fill their plates.” An assembly worker with 24 years’ experience added: “The union never does anything to help me. If you have a job, then OK, but if you don’t, it’s bad luck. That’s what the union representative said to us.”

Paul, another assembly worker, said: “The union didn’t do anything. Some people got upset after being told they had lost their job and went to talk to the

union, but they said they couldn’t do anything.”

Some workers expressed agreement with the union’s claim that the only way to defend their jobs was to call for protectionist measures to prevent jobs from “going offshore.” This is a reactionary diversion advanced by the unions to defuse mounting anger. Ford is operating with a worked-out international strategy to slash costs across the board, in every country. The “One Ford” plan announced in Detroit during 2007 involved the centralisation of production in a limited number of manufacturing centres. Ever since then, auto analysts have anticipated that Ford’s operations in Australia would be radically recast or, more likely, cease altogether.

To defend their jobs, wages and conditions, car workers in Australia urgently need their own international strategy, counterposed to that of the corporate executives.

The first step is to break out the straitjacket imposed by the trade unions, which operate on behalf of the corporations and government. That requires the formation of organisations of their own, including plant committees elected by the rank-and-file. Workers should turn to other sections of workers, first and foremost other auto workers, to develop a united counter-offensive against the corporate onslaught that is being spearheaded by the Labor government.

Above all, a new political strategy is required, unifying workers internationally on the basis of a fight for workers’ governments committed to socialist policies, including putting the banks and major corporations, such as the auto giants, under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class.



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