Australian glass workers face devastating plant closures

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13 March 2013

At least 150 workers at CSR's Viridian glass-making factories in western Sydney confront the closure of their plants and the destruction of their jobs, in the latest of the swathe of job cuts sweeping through the manufacturing sector in Australia.

CSR, an Australian building products conglomerate, told the stock exchange on Monday that it would shut its Ingleburn float and laminating glass plant in July, and merge two glass processing facilities, at Wetherill Park and Erskine Park, by next January.

Production line workers arriving for work at the Ingleburn plant this morning told the *World Socialist Web Site* that they were shocked and angered by the decision, and the way it was announced. "We only found out through the news. The company told the shareholders first, not the workers!" one said. "It's not just us. You see job cuts and closures on the news now all the time. It doesn't feel great when it happens to you."

Other workers described the news as a "disgrace," "unbelievable" and "devastating for 150 families." One commented: "Manufacturing is just disappearing!"

CSR's move points to an intensification of corporate restructuring across Australia. It comes hard on the heels of the elimination of 170 jobs at nearby Rosella sauces, 700 at Boral, 350 at Toyota, 100 at General Motors Holden, 100 at Santos, and another 170 BlueScope Steel, as well as 155 jobs at BHP Billiton's Mount Keith nickel mine in Western Australia, and 1,460 jobs in banks—ANZ, Westpac and the Royal Bank of Scotland.

"I'll be looking for another job with all this going on," a production line worker commented. "I'll have to knock on doors and go to employment agencies. This closure puts a big question mark over families, especially those with kids and mortgages."

Working class regions like western Sydney, where official unemployment rates are already about double the national average of 5.4 percent, are being devastated, leaving little chance of retrenched workers finding equivalent jobs, and depriving young people of any hope of secure employment.

The financial markets welcomed the CSR decision, and sent the company's share price rising. In its statement, CSR emphasised that the job losses were just the start of a drastic restructuring, with further details to be released within months. A question mark remains over all Viridian operations, including its major plant at Dandenong, in Melbourne's southwest. The remaining workers in every plant will confront a relentless drive to ratchet up the rate of exploitation, through speed-up, loss of conditions and real wage cuts.

The company attributed its restructuring to the "persistently high Australian dollar", which had made glass imports cheaper, "weaker residential and commercial construction markets", expanded glass making capacity, and "increasing energy and manufacturing costs in Australia".

Business Spectator columnist Stephen Bartholomeusz hailed CSR for revealing the "tinge of silver" in the "dark cloud that has enveloped the manufacturing and retail sectors in the past few years." He said the high value of the Australian dollar "might be helping to fix Australia's weak productivity growth."

Likewise, HSBC chief economist Paul Bloxham, formerly with the Reserve Bank of Australia, said the high dollar was forcing employers to become "leaner and meaner." He pointed to figures released last week by the Bureau of Statistics showing that labour productivity rose 3.5 percent in the 12 months to December, compared to 0.9 percent in 2011.

With the full backing of the federal Labor

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government, big business is exploiting the high dollar to wage a far-reaching offensive aimed at boosting productivity at the expense of the working class. The trade unions are completely complicit in this process, blocking any fight by workers to defend their jobs, wages and conditions.

The Australian Workers Union (AWU), which covers most of the Viridian workers, has already made it plain that it intends to assist the company in implementing the plant closures. In a media release, New South Wales AWU state secretary Russ Collison said the Ingleburn plant had become “unviable” and added that the union was “not entirely surprised by the company’s decision”.

While Collison claimed that the union would be “fighting to make sure that Viridian workers aren’t left out in cold”, he merely called on CSR to treat the workers “with the respect they deserve in this difficult situation”. What this actually means can be seen from the fact that just 18 months ago, the AWU helped the company halve the Ingleburn workforce in CSR’s previous restructuring operation, mainly via so-called voluntary redundancies. Since then, CSR has intensified its exploitation of the Viridian workforce, while preparing the closure.

“We have had to multi-skill and double up on jobs,” a production line worker explained to the WSWS. “And we haven’t been able to take annual leave when we wanted, only during the Christmas shut down period.” He gave a picture of a dramatic escalation of output per worker. There are now only 10 production line workers per shift, producing 1,650 tonnes of glass a week, compared to 20 years ago, when 198 workers per shift manufactured up to 3,000 tonnes.

Another worker, who had been employed at the plant for almost 25 years—since it was opened by Pilkington, the British-based glass manufacturing giant, in 1988—said it would be difficult for the retrenched workers to find other jobs, because they were mostly unskilled. He had no faith in CSR’s claim that it might find jobs for workers elsewhere in its operations. He denounced the company and the Gillard government. “It’s not our fault that CSR spent too much in buying this business from Pilkington in 2007,” he said. “We’re just pawns, used and abused. The government is also to blame. A lot of workers are losing their jobs, and this government is doing nothing positive to help manufacturing.”

In order to defend their jobs and livelihoods, Viridian workers must reject the closures. This means taking matters out of the hands of the AWU and establishing independent rank-and-file committees to turn out to other workers facing similar attacks, on the basis of political fight against CSR and the Gillard Labor government. The Viridian plants should be occupied and turned into rallying points and organising centres for workers throughout Australia and internationally to oppose the destruction of jobs, conditions and living standards.

CSR’s closures typify the global offensive by the corporate elite, backed by every government, to utilise the crisis of world capitalism—produced by their rampant asset-stripping, speculation and criminal financial manipulations—to tear up the social conditions and basic rights of the working class. This can be answered only through the fight for a workers’ government to implement a socialist program that includes placing basic industries, such as glass making and other manufacturing, under social ownership and workers’ control.

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