

Australia: CSR glass workers discuss issues posed by plant closures

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27 March 2013

Over the past two weeks, glass manufacturing workers at CSR Viridian's plants in Sydney and Melbourne have spoken to *World Socialist Web Site* correspondents about the closure and merger of facilities that will cost more than 200 jobs.

CSR, a building products conglomerate, announced on March 11 it would shut its float and laminating glass plant in Ingleburn, Sydney by July, and merge two nearby glass processing facilities, at Wetherill Park and Erskine Park, by next January. In doing so, the company also assured the financial markets that further cost-cutting would be announced within months, throwing a question mark over many more CSR jobs, including those at a glass plant in Dandenong South, Melbourne, where up to 15 jobs are also being eliminated.

The CSR workers face a fight not just against the company but also the federal Labor government, which fully backs the corporate restructuring drive throughout the manufacturing industry, and the trade unions, which are committed to smothering any resistance to CSR's closures and mergers.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard and Industry Minister Greg Combet have remained completely silent on CSR's announcement, but stand behind the company, as they have in every previous corporate restructure, including those by Qantas, BlueScope Steel, Telstra, Toyota, General Motors and Ford.

Since an initial Australian Workers Union media statement on March 11, the AWU and Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), which cover CSR workers, have not said a word on their web sites about the Viridian closures. The unions are following a well-worn path—isolate their members, keep fellow workers in the dark, declare that “nothing can be done” to stop closures, and assist the employers to

ensure that any resistance is stifled.

Both the AWU and the federal government were told of the plant closures and job cuts in advance. When questioned by the WSWs, the union's assistant state secretary Stephen Bali revealed that he had personally spoken with Industry Minister Combet before CSR's announcement.

At workplace meetings at Ingleburn, the AWU has called for two weeks' extra redundancy pay per year of service, all casual work to be counted toward redundancy entitlements, and opportunities to redeploy to Dandenong South. These demands are aimed at enforcing “an orderly closure” of the plant, blocking any fight in defence of jobs.

Bali told the WSWs that it was impossible to fight the closures, because they had been “announced to the stock exchange” and were “purely a commercial decision.” He said the union was now negotiating a “closure package,” as per the AWU's enterprise agreement with CSR. That package included a plea for “job swaps” to give redundant workers access to other CSR jobs, even though such vacancies were unlikely because, in Bali's words, “there is a lot of downsizing across the CSR empire.”

In fact the unions have collaborated with CSR in imposing speed-ups and productivity drives across its operations. The overall workforce has also been halved over the past five years, to 3,582. Among the other casualties of CSR's job cuts have been workers in brick kilns, ventilation systems companies, and fibre cement, plasterboard and roof tiling operations.

In interviews and comments given to the WSWs, workers at the Ingleburn, Wetherill Park and Dandenong plants firstly highlighted the terrible impact that the job losses would have on them, their families and communities. At Ingleburn, some had worked at

the plant for many years, making it very difficult to now find similar work, particularly under conditions of rising unemployment.

“It’ll be a whole new change for all families here,” one worker said. “Some might get away with paying off their house, then looking for casual jobs to pay the bills.” Another observed: “Obviously, loss of jobs means loss of income and finding new employment. It will be hard for everyone.”

At Dandenong, workers predicted that the axe would soon fall on them as well. One with 26 years’ experience at the plant commented: “It’s going to happen here too. They [CSR] are going to change things, but we have no idea. [CSR] will be sitting on it for a couple of months and if it happens it’ll be a ‘bombshell.’ We are never in the know here.” He explained that between 200 and 300 jobs had already been eliminated in the Dandenong facility during the past 10 to 15 years.

Asked about the Gillard government, workers generally expressed loathing, but held onto hopes, promoted by the trade unions, that the government could be pressured into providing financial assistance to the glass industry to keep it afloat. An Ingleburn worker said: “The government is not doing enough. It should do something to protect the industry, like they do with the car industry.” Another commented: “The Gillard government has done absolutely nothing for manufacturing. Last year, they offered some money for struggling companies ... but the money was nowhere near enough.”

In reality, the Labor government has worked hand-in-glove with all the major companies to slash jobs and conditions, in order to make their Australian operations “globally competitive.” Far from protecting jobs in the auto sector, Labor’s subsidies to the major car companies are consciously aimed at eliminating jobs and restructuring operations to boost profit rates. At the same time, Australia workers are pitted against their fellow workers overseas.

Turning to the role of the unions, workers were cynical, but also tended to condemn these organisations for “not doing enough.” One said the AWU had managed to negotiate with the company to have the last round of cuts “confined to voluntary redundancies,” but that would be impossible this time around. For years, in fact, the unions have used so-called “voluntary”

retrenchments as a means of pressuring workers into accepting job losses.

Another worker commented: “The AWU says we can’t do anything. All they tell us is to ‘work safe,’ but we always do! They are working together with the government.” The union declares that “nothing can be done,” even as it collaborates with the company and governments, in order to paralyse workers and prevent any struggle to defend jobs.

Workers responded thoughtfully when the WSWS raised the necessity of organising rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions and of turning to other workers facing similar attacks. If plants and companies are “unviable” under capitalism, they should be nationalised under the democratic control of the working class, as part of the socialist reorganisation of society.

For many workers these ideas were new. “I’ve never heard of anything like that,” one remarked. Another commented: “I don’t know how good of an idea that would be, but I think it is something that should be discussed and thought about carefully... It’s something to think about for sure.”



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