

Union isolates Australian glass workers as plant closures loom

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Workers at CSR Viridian glass making plants are being deliberately isolated by the Australian Workers Union (AWU) as the company proceeds with its plans to axe more than 200 jobs and shut the Ingleburn, Sydney plant by mid-July. An Ingleburn worker told the WSWS: “We have been left to rot. The union is just fighting for dribs and drabs, while we are being left to find our own way.”

The AWU has not said a public word about the closures, which also involve the merger of two other Sydney facilities at Wetherill Park and Erskine Park, since issuing a media release on March 11, in which AWU state secretary Russ Collinson declared that the shutdowns were simply inevitable.

Far from fighting the closures, the AWU has insisted that workers must accept that “nothing can be done” and has worked closely with CSR, via the union’s enterprise agreement “closure package” deal with the company, to block any resistance. Another production line worker commented: “The union’s working together with the company. The union only told us that the company would provide us with some training to find other work.”

Workers at other CSR plants, many of whom also face job losses at the hands of the building products conglomerate, have been kept completely in the dark. So have workers everywhere else, including in the industrial areas that directly surround the Viridian plants. The AWU and other unions are playing the same role across Australia, amid a deepening wave of corporate job destruction, including the Shell refinery closure in Geelong and another 500 retrenchments by General Motors Holden.

The unions are acting in partnership with the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard, which is actively backing the “restructuring” of the

economy by the banks and big business, in order to match the assault on workers’ jobs and conditions unleashed across Europe, the United States and internationally in the wake of the 2008 global financial crash.

As part of this drive, CSR, whose biggest shareholders are banks and finance houses—Westpac, National Australia Bank, Chase Manhattan, ANZ and AMP—has halved its entire workforce since 2008. According to CSR’s web site, one of its major sources of revenue has become “maximising financial returns by developing surplus former manufacturing sites and industrial land for sale.” The Ingleburn plant has been targeted for this kind of asset-stripping operation, just like the former Pilkington’s glass plant that CSR shut down in mid-2009 at Alexandria, in inner Sydney.

In discussions with the WSWS, workers at Ingleburn expressed disgust and frustration toward CSR, the AWU and the Gillard government. Many have prepared and sent out multiple résumés applying for other jobs, without any success. One production line worker commented: “I’ve applied for half a dozen jobs already, but had no responses as yet. It’s tough out there. The government has done nothing. We are just a statistic as far as they are concerned.”

Another worker said: “I am putting out résumés, like everyone else. It’s hard out there. CSR got an independent company to come in to help us write résumés and letters. That’s part of our EBA [enterprise bargaining agreement]. It’s called a closure package.” He spoke bitterly about how the AWU’s role was helping CSR meet the demands of its big shareholders for higher profit rates:

“CSR told the stock market first about the closure, and we found out later. The banks who own CSR want dividends! All they want is profits. Employees get the

fling! CSR could have sold off the glass manufacturing business, but it did not want competitors. They would rather close the whole thing, and sell off the land. CSR is well known for selling off property; it's a major income earner."

This worker was previously displaced from the former Pilkington glass plant at Alexandria, which CSR closed two years after acquiring Pilkington's Australasian operations in 2007. He commented: "I was redeployed to Ingleburn. I was one of the lucky ones then, now I'm looking for work again."

As a result of the concerted operation mounted by the AWU and the Labor government to stifle any opposition by CSR Viridian workers, those who spoke to the WSWS could not see a way to halt the closure and defend their jobs. "I have no idea how to fight or defeat the plant's shut down," one said. "The company has decided that it's not viable and the market has determined that it is cheaper to import glass." Another said: "The guys have accepted the closure. Strikes won't help."

The starting point of any struggle against the closure is the recognition that it will only take place in a rebellion against the unions, who are acting as enforcers for the company and the Labor government. CSR workers are not alone. In Australia and around the world, governments and trade unions are insisting that the working class must bear the burden of the worsening breakdown of the profit system.

CSR Viridian workers should take a stand, reject the closures and launch a fight to defend all jobs. This means taking matters into their own hands, by forming rank and file committees, completely independent of the unions, and sending delegations to nearby factories, other CSR plants and every other workplace possible to win support.

Any attempt to shut the plants should be answered with factory occupations, transforming them into organising centres for a political and industrial struggle against the devastation of jobs and conditions taking place across manufacturing and other industries.

Against those who say the Viridian plants are not "viable", the demand should be raised for the nationalisation of CSR, along with the banks and other basic industries, under the democratic control of the working class.

Such a struggle will mean a direct confrontation with

the Labor government, and the fight for a workers' government and a socialist program. Society in Australia and internationally must be reorganised from top to bottom to meet the pressing social needs of all, rather than the profits of the wealthy corporate elites.

We urge CSR Viridian workers, and all others facing the destruction of jobs and conditions, to contact us to discuss this perspective, and to attend the public meetings called to launch the Socialist Equality Party's federal election campaign.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact