

SEP candidate speaks to workers about Ford closure

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27 May 2013

Tania Baptist, a Socialist Equality Party (SEP) Senate candidate in Victoria, campaigned among workers and young people in Broadmeadows and its surrounding suburbs over the weekend, discussing the implications of Ford's decision to shut down all production in Australia by 2016.

If Ford's closure proceeds as planned, 1,200 jobs will be destroyed in the company's two plants, in Broadmeadows and in the regional Victorian city of Geelong. Thousands of jobs in the car component supply industry will also be eliminated.

The Ford plant at Broadmeadows opened in 1959, at the same time as the state government's Housing Commission was developing the area as an industrial satellite city, nearly 20 kilometres north of Melbourne, based on public housing projects. Ford's presence quickly attracted other factories—including tyre and auto components plants, steelworks and textile and clothing manufacturers. The population boomed in the 1960s as workers moved into the area, seeking employment. Reflecting the contempt of government authorities for the working-class residents, Broadmeadows was developed without a hospital and other basic social infrastructure and services. No major shopping centre was established until the mid-1970s.

Today Broadmeadows still lacks a hospital, features low-quality housing, and has virtually no recreational facilities for young people. The area has been devastated by successive waves of plant shutdowns and mass layoffs over the past three decades. The current Labor government has spearheaded the latest pro-business restructuring drive, with more than 130,000 manufacturing jobs destroyed across Australia since the 2008 global financial crisis. In Broadmeadows and neighbouring suburbs, plants operated by Pacific Brands, South Pacific Tyres and Caterpillar, and

numerous auto component plants have shut down in recent years. Hundreds of Ford workers have been retrenched over the same period.

The outcome is an official unemployment rate of 9.6 percent. The real jobless rate far higher, if those who dropped out of the workforce in despair and those who qualify for the disability support pension are included. Youth unemployment is more than 50 percent. Broadmeadows and neighbouring Dallas and Coolaroo comprise three of Victoria's five poorest suburbs. Poverty and unemployment are responsible for a devastating social crisis, with widespread problems of drug and alcohol abuse, family breakdown, homelessness and mental health problems.

Jay Walles, a low-paid worker in manufacturing, spoke with SEP campaigners about Ford's pending closure. "Everything is profit driven," he said. "They have been given a billion dollars in hand outs. Where is that money going?"

He continued: "The companies know what they can get away with. I've got friends who have to eat less so they can feed their kids. Everyone should have a full stomach. I'm in manufacturing, so it's a real concern for me. Every company is downsizing—they are cutting back, so what do you do? I thought I would have a job for 20 years. The unions need to step up."

Tania Baptist responded by clarifying the active role being played by the trade unions in enforcing plant closures and layoffs. "The unions are fully complicit in this," she explained. "At Ford and at other industries, they are the ones who impose a so-called orderly closure and make sure that workers don't put up a struggle in defence of their jobs."

Walles replied: "That's right. At my work, people say 'what's the point of the union, they aren't going to do anything anyway'."

Richard, a worker in the paper industry, spoke with Baptist about Ford workers confronting the prospect of trying to survive on the below-poverty unemployment benefit. “Who can survive on \$300 a fortnight?” he asked. “How many millions of dollars did they [federal and state governments] give Ford, and they just turned around and pulled the plug. How many families are going to be out of work? One of my neighbours works there.”

Richard continued: “I’ve lost faith in both parties because they’re not really for the worker. My son has a disability. Because of the nature of his disability, he can only work 10 hours a week. He is 20-years-old and gets just over \$10 an hour for ten hours work. We do his claim form, and I’ve noticed that his money is getting lower and lower.”

Baptist spoke about the Labor government’s bogus claims to be assisting the disabled through a proposed new insurance scheme. “The National Disability Insurance Scheme is aimed at getting as many people as possible off the pension and into low paid jobs,” she explained. “This serves as a mechanism to drive down the wages of the working class as a whole, with more people struggling to get the few jobs that exist.”

Baptist spoke with a municipal council worker, Andrew Ridsdale, in Craigieburn, north of Broadmeadows. Craigieburn has grown rapidly in recent years, with privately developed housing estates attracting young working-class families who cannot afford the high cost of purchasing a home closer to Melbourne’s inner suburbs. Ridsdale was concerned about the consequences of the Ford closure. “I think it will affect the area heavily and it will impact on unemployment,” he said. “The area is developing. The problem is with all the new estates being built, where are the jobs going to come from?”

He continued: “It’s hard to say what people can do. Is there alternative work available in other factories? There is a bit of a bail-out, with the government giving them [other employers] a bit of money. But the problem is that, the month after Ford is closed, you will have a super rise in unemployment and everyone will have used that money. You can see it all going downhill. I work with the council; my conditions aren’t too bad but the pay isn’t great. Moneywise it’s not easy. I can see others doing it tough.

“I donate money to charity where I can. You want to

give more, but you can’t always do it.”

Baptist responded: “Charity doesn’t solve the root cause of poverty, which is the capitalist system. This is a society where a small handful of people accumulate obscene amounts of wealth, and the rest of us have to live off the crumbs. Workers need a new political party and a socialist perspective.”

“Yes,” Ridsdale replied, “charity just puts a bandaid on it, without changing the system.”

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