

# Growing hardship in mining town of Cessnock

Our correspondents  
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Socialist Equality Party (SEP) election campaigners spoke to residents in the regional town of Cessnock in the Hunter Valley region, around 50 kilometres west of Newcastle.

The town was once a centre of underground coal mining that provided thousands of jobs in the mines and associated industries. It now suffers high levels of disadvantage and unemployment. Underground mines were progressively closed down during the 1990s as the mining conglomerates shifted to open cut mining further up the Hunter Valley to maximise profits.

The official unemployment rate in Cessnock is 7.3 percent, the highest level in the Hunter region. In the past two years, Norsk Hydro closed its aluminium smelter in the nearby town of Kurri Kurri and Pacific Brands shut its clothing manufacturing plant in Cessnock.

People constantly told the SEP team that jobs in the area were exceedingly scarce and the few on offer were mostly low paid casual or part time. Small retail businesses are also being impacted. One gift shop owner said eight shops had closed in the main street during the past 12 months alone.

Shane Cherry, a vineyard worker who moved to Cessnock 13 years ago to find cheaper housing, said “disadvantage in Cessnock has massively increased.” He explained: “Unemployment, especially among young people here, is very high. I get disgusted at the way some of the so-called job placement agencies treat the unemployed, blaming them and degrading them when in reality there are no jobs for them in the area, especially if they are unskilled.”

Cherry added: “The only hope for young people is to get employment in the mines further up the Valley or in the vineyards, but most do not have the skills demanded by the mining companies and have no way

of gaining them. The situation has caused young people to become disillusioned and there is a real problem of drug dependency, with nothing on the horizon to break the cycle.”

The vineyard worker commented: “It’s true that a few people are able to earn decent wages in the mines but thousands of others across the area are living on less than \$12,000 a year on unemployment benefits. I think some years ago there was a conscious agenda to create considerable levels of unemployment in Australia to get a situation in which workers are intimidated, and to allow wages and working conditions to be cut.”

Cherry was disillusioned with both the Labor and Liberal parties. “Neither political party has done anything to address the problems and government cuts to social services have made it even worse.” He did not think it made much difference whether Kevin Rudd or Julia Gillard headed the Labor government.

“I voted for Labor before Rudd was done over by Gillard. I was disgusted with the move against Rudd because I was brought up to value loyalty. However, both political parties, no matter who leads them, look after the interests of big business. It gives donations to both sides to make sure it gets its agenda up, no matter who wins the elections.”

Cherry responded to a SEP leaflet calling for the defence of whistle blower Edward Snowden against the Obama administration’s witch-hunt. He said: “I think he (Snowden) has high morals. He is really brave in putting himself at risk to tell people what they have the right to know about the secret spying operations of their government. People need to speak up for him.”

Young worker Chris Fletcher, who recently lost his job as a car detailer, said it was extremely difficult for his family to manage on the poverty-level Newstart

unemployment benefit. He had been sacked around three months after telling his employer he could not come to work because his young child had been taken seriously ill to hospital.

“The boss just said come into work now or not at all,” Fletcher said. “I did not want to be sacked but a person’s family, especially children, is more important. Since then I have not been able to find work.”

Fletcher explained the financial pressures he faced. “One of the main things making it hard is the rising cost of electricity. It eats up an enormous amount of our income just to cook and, now its winter, to keep the place warm, and that is important for the baby. I am worried that the cost will go up further when the state government finishes privatising the power industry. Then prices will sky rocket, like they did in Victoria.

“Unless I can find work with reasonable pay we will be unable to manage. It is very difficult to find anything in this area because jobs are very scarce and there is a lot of competition to get them.”

Fletcher said the closures of the aluminium smelter and the Bonds (Pacific Brands) clothing factory had “destroyed hundreds of better paying jobs and really hit this area hard. I know people who lost everything and could not pay mortgages on their homes. What made me real angry about the Bonds’ closure was that while the women lost their jobs, the company executives gave themselves massive pay rises.”

The young worker had no “faith in either Labor or Liberals.” He commented: “Neither party did anything to stop jobs being destroyed in Cessnock. On top of that, the Gillard government gave nothing extra to the unemployed in the last budget.”

Sarah Leroux, a young mother who has lived in West Cessnock for six years and worked as a waitress before the recent birth of her child, said that finding any kind of decent employment without qualifications was hopeless. “Waitressing is pretty straightforward, but you need your RSA and RCG (liquor and gambling service certificates), which are expensive to get.”

Speaking on the high levels of unemployment among young people, Leroux said: “There are a lot of people coming on to 18 who still don’t have jobs. I’m 21 and a lot of my friends are still unemployed.”

Leroux’s partner is a mechanic and the young couple is staying with his grandparents in a bid to save money until they can afford to rent their own home. Leroux

explained: “We’ve been looking at places to rent, so we sort of know how hard things are going to be financially.” Rental prices in the area can be as high as \$300 to \$400 a week, while average wages are under \$940 a week.

Leroux also spoke of the social problems in the area and growing tensions fuelled by unemployment and collapsing services. “A lot of bad things happen,” she said. “Recently a young boy was stabbed and a couple of nights ago a gentleman shot himself. There’s always bad news, always something happening.”

*The author also recommends:*

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*Authorised by Nick Beams, 113/55 Flemington Rd, North Melbourne VIC 3051*



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