

Low wages rife in Brisbane's southern suburbs

Our correspondents
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The Socialist Equality Party campaign for the party's election meeting in the southern Brisbane suburb of Beenleigh on July 7 has found widespread instances of workers, especially young people, being paid extremely low wages, sometimes illegally.

These poverty-level wages, combined with levels of official unemployment of around 20 percent, are being used to apply enormous pressure to the 800 workers at the Beenleigh meat works to accept pay cuts of up to 20 percent in order to stop the plant's threatened closure.

One female worker at the Eagleby shopping plaza, near Beenleigh, related with disgust the fact that, at the age of 36, she was being paid just \$12 an hour, cash in hand, to work in a retail outlet. "I have not had to work for such low pay since I was a teenager," she told Mike Head, an SEP Senate candidate for Queensland.

Being employed for cash, on an illegally low rate of pay, also means no annual or sick leave entitlements and no workers' compensation coverage for injury. "I told my boss that if I get hurt, I will sue him as a customer," she said. "Other people working in some shops in this plaza are being paid as little as \$5 an hour," she added.

Asked her thoughts on whether Julia Gillard's replacement by Kevin Rudd as Labor Party leader and prime minister would make any difference, she said she doubted that it would.

A meat worker said he quit his job at the Teys/Cargill meat plant in Beenleigh after the company unveiled its wage-cutting ultimatum: either take a pay cut or the factory will close. "Workers there work bloody hard, and they get pretty average wages," he explained. "Now the company wants 20 percent extra labour for a 15 percent cut in wages. It was a circus!"

Because he was qualified as a supermarket butcher, the meat worker said he was "lucky" to be able to find

alternative work. He denounced the company's pay-cutting as "bullying tactics": "Some of those poor blokes have been there since they left school, and they haven't got a chance to go anywhere else, or they're too old. I worked at Teys/Cargill for three months on \$18.51 an hour in the boning room, as a trimmer. It was disgraceful!"

Lolita, recently arrived from New Zealand, said the conditions were "not much different" in the two countries. "Things are getting tough. There's no jobs, not enough wages, of course, and people getting redundant."

In New Zealand, Lolita worked in retail, motel cleaning and a café. "Everyone is working really hard, what for I don't know, just to survive and pay your bills," she said. The biggest cost was electricity, plus education. She was appalled by the wage-cutting at the meat works. "It's a shocker to cut wages. It will make it pretty hard to live. It's the same old story, money, money, money—the rich are getting richer."

Although some people hoped that Rudd would be an improvement over Gillard, many expressed disenchantment with the political system itself. **Zaylyn** told the SEP candidate that people were being "kept in the dark" about why Gillard was installed as prime minister in 2010.

Young people, in particular, are facing a grim future. **Amy**, 17, said she applied for hundreds of jobs, over many months, before getting work at a petrol station for \$8.82 an hour.

Jesse, 18, who works as a casual at a fast food outlet for \$12 an hour, said he had applied for an apprenticeship with Energex, an electricity supplier, only to find 900 others in the line. He spoke about the situation facing young people in Australia and internationally.

“A lot of young people coming out of school don’t really know much about their rights as workers,” Jesse explained. “I’m working for a fast food chain at the moment, and they pretty much rely on the ignorance of young people to make a profit, or an even larger one than they already make. That’s baffling and wrong in so many ways.

“I have a very strong feeling that it’s not just in that business, that it’s quite far-spread. On top of that, it’s actually hard for people to find work, so they are inclined to stay in these kinds of jobs. They feel that they have no rights and that they are oppressed. And it’s just getting worse really. It’s getting harder to find work, and good work, where they are treated like people, and not like slaves.”

Asked to comment on the mass unemployment that faced young people internationally, Jesse agreed that it indicated a failed economic system. “They cannot provide a future, even in terms of a strong worker base, or education wise, where they are simply cutting in all spectrums, not just here, but globally too,” he said. “It shows that they have not learnt much since the Great Depression of the 1930s, or have learnt a lot, and just gone backwards, which seems to be the case.”

Jesse added that the true extent of unemployment was being hidden. “They obscure the statistics to show that there are not as many unemployed as there actually are. It’s like they’re trying to perpetuate a lie, about how bad things are. And the fact that the media is controlled by all the big corporations worldwide, means that the truth is not being made known.”

The young man was worried about the prospect of another world war, particularly because of US President Barack Obama’s “pivot” to Asia, seeking to undercut China’s position. “The pivot to Asia is quite an interesting dynamic, because Asia is where all the booming economies are,” he said. “It seems like America is trying directly to inhibit their growth in any way possible.”

“If there was another war there would likely be some kind of conscription, or you would feel guilted into joining the military. The military generally goes for young people and unless you’re part of the wealthy powerful families, you are going to be brought into this conflict, that you have no real part of, and no benefit from being a part of. You are just going to end up dying for something that you don’t believe you should be

fighting for in the first place.”

Asked about the treatment of the young American intelligence whistleblower Edward Snowden, Jesse replied: “It’s quite shocking really. The fact that even after all his revelations, they are denouncing him as a traitor. Even in the media, they are basically saying that even though he knew they were doing something wrong, he shouldn’t say anything.”

Jesse commented: “That didn’t work for the Nazis after the war. At the Nuremberg trials, the legal precedent was set that if something bad was being done, you had to step forward, or you would be held accountable. Now they are just backtracking on that, because all of a sudden it’s them under fire.”

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