

Reject the assault on GMH jobs and conditions!

James Cogan—SEP Senate candidate for South Australia
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In a test case for the entire working class, workers at General Motors Holden (GMH) plants in Adelaide and Melbourne confront a savage assault on their jobs, wages and conditions. Working in close collaboration with the federal Labor government, the unions have hammered out a deal with GMH to rip up existing conditions and slash costs to save the company as much as it originally demanded in June via pay cuts of up to \$200 a week.

Starting tomorrow, the 1,700 workers at the GMH assembly plant in Elizabeth, in Adelaide's north, followed by their fellow workers in Melbourne, are being forced to vote on the company's ultimatum: accept the reversal of hard-won conditions or GM will shut production by 2016, destroying their jobs and those of thousands more workers in related industries. The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), which helped draft the cost-cutting pact, is cynically refusing to recommend a vote for or against. What the union had made clear is that, if its members reject the ultimatum, it will accept, and implement, the closure.

The union-management agreement involves a wage freeze for the next three years—a real pay cut. Plus, combined morning and afternoon breaks will be reduced from 40 to 26 minutes. The timing of annual holidays will be dictated by the company, such as during production shutdowns. Medical certificates will be required for any more than two sick days a year. The company can demand workers report for another shift after just a 10-hour break, and provide only 24 hours' notice of compulsory work overtime.

In addition, management will have carte blanche to hire casual workers and contractors to fill any labour shortages. This is after 400 workers at Elizabeth were laid off on July 26—via so-called voluntary

redundancies facilitated by the unions. The unions have now agreed that casuals can be paid the “lowest rate” legally possible. The company will be under no obligation to offer them a full-time position. The wages of apprentices will also be reduced to the lowest rate. To intimidate workers and enforce speed-up, workers can be sacked for “inefficiency.”

The Socialist Equality Party calls on GMH workers to reject this company-union deal and to launch a struggle, independent of the unions, to oppose the closure and defend all jobs and conditions.

GM's restructuring is part of an international onslaught by the transnational car companies, as they ruthlessly compete for market share and profit in a worsening global economic crisis. GM workers in the United States, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Europe, South Korea, China, and Australia are being pitted against one another, all told by the company that the survival of their jobs depends on being cheaper and more “efficient” than their fellow workers in other countries.

Ford announced earlier this year it will end production in Australia by 2016, destroying thousands of jobs, because the plants in Melbourne and Geelong are not “internationally competitive.” The closure follows decades of restructuring and job cuts imposed on workers by management, with the assistance of the unions, supposedly to keep the plants open.

Any struggle by GMH workers to defend jobs and conditions will necessarily involve a political fight. The federal Labor government stands fully behind GMH. Its ministers have been engaged in constant back-room talks with union officials and the company since CEO Mike Devereux declared on June 18 that the Elizabeth plant was “uncompetitive.” In fact, the government will reward GMH for its restructuring with a major share of a new \$200 million handout to the auto companies.

The plan to slash workers' conditions at GMH is fully in line with Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's announced "productivity partnership" with business and the unions. Rudd's blueprint means a relentless offensive to drive down the wages and conditions of workers in Australia to be "competitive" with those in Asia, the US and other parts of the world.

The AMWU and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) are functioning as the direct agents of GMH and the Labor government. Every provision in the proposed cost-cutting agreement has been agreed to, and in some cases, proposed by the unions.

The SEP calls on GMH workers to take a stand on behalf of the entire working class and vote against the cost-cutting plan. If it is rammed through, the agreement will set a new benchmark for companies, large and small, to impose their own brutal restructuring measures. A struggle by GMH workers must become the starting point for a counter-offensive by the working class against the corporate and government onslaught on jobs, wages and living standards.

The fight to defend jobs and conditions at GMH will only take place in a rebellion against the unions and the straitjacket of the Labor government's Fair Work Australia industrial laws. The starting point is the formation of independent rank-and-file committees and a turn to other sections of workers in Australia and internationally facing similar attacks. Specific appeals should be made to other auto workers at Ford, Toyota and other plants, and to GM workers internationally such as at Bochum in Germany. GMH's threat of closure should be answered by occupying the Elizabeth plant and mobilising workers and youth across Adelaide to defend it.

Such a struggle must be based on a socialist and internationalist perspective. Workers are not responsible for the global capitalist crisis, but are being made to bear its burdens through the endless corporate drive for profits, productivity and "competitiveness." The only alternative is a revolutionary one—the socialist re-organisation of society to meet the pressing social needs of working people, not the private profit of the wealthy elite.

In the 2013 election, the SEP is campaigning for a workers' government and socialist policies, including the expropriation of the banks and major companies

such as GM. They must be placed under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class, to ensure decent, well-paid jobs for all. I urge workers and young people to support our campaign in every possible way, and to join and build the SEP as the revolutionary party needed for the struggles ahead.

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