

Jerry White speaks with Ford Australia workers

Our reporters
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Jerry White, the 2012 presidential candidate of the Socialist Equality Party (US), yesterday campaigned among Ford Australia workers outside the production plant in the Melbourne suburb of Broadmeadows. He was met with a warm response from workers, who were eager to learn about the situation confronting auto workers in the US and the issues involved in the Detroit bankruptcy.

Patrick O'Connor, the Socialist Equality Party's Senate candidate in Victoria, and SEP members and supporters also spoke with the car workers, outlining the party's socialist perspective. Earlier this year, Ford announced that it will shut down all production in Australia by 2016, immediately destroying 1,200 jobs in its two plants in Broadmeadows and Geelong, and triggering thousands more layoffs in the car components sector. The company is already imposing rolling work stoppages, standing down the workforce on half pay. (See "Ford Australia stands down production workers")

The discussions quickly raised the common class issues facing workers around the world.

Sam told White: "They're going to China now because it's cheaper there. They don't just want a profit rate of 90 percent, they want a profit rate of 1,000 percent. I've worked here for 29 years. Over that time, it's always been the same: accept these cuts or we'll close down. It's all for profits."

White explained: "The US now has become a source of cheap labour, because the United Auto Workers union has collaborated with the Obama administration to cut the wages of workers to \$15 an hour. Ford is shutting down plants in Mexico to move to the United States, and the union is using nationalism to divide workers. We have to unite internationally."

Sam and White also discussed Washington's

preparations for a military assault on Syria. "We're saying that the working class has the same interests all over the world," the former presidential candidate explained. "We have an interest in having a job. We don't have an interest in killing each other to see who's going to control the world. We have an interest in democracy, not in a government like Edward Snowden has revealed—a government spying on everyone's phone calls."

Sam replied: "They're doing it here too. That WikiLeaks guy is Australian. The Americans want to get [Julian] Assange now." White asked if Sam had heard of Private Bradley Manning, the convicted whistleblower. "Yes," Sam answered. "When they kill people in war, they want to blame the people who reveal the crimes. And Manning showed the truth about who the US is killing."

White also spoke with Rob saying: "We're fighting to unite workers around the world. We think everyone has the right to a job." Rob responded: "I agree, but what can you do?"

White answered: "The problem is that the working class has no party to defend ourselves. The Labor Party is in bed with the corporations, and it's now supporting Obama in another war in Syria. There's growing opposition in the working class, but a new political strategy and a new leadership is needed. The unions are company unions. They're in bed with the company."

Rob replied: "Yeah, I know ... I'm one of the shop stewards here; it's screwed. What do you do? You come in, you do your hours, and that's it. Soon it's going to be gone. We'll have to work for \$15 an hour somewhere." White pointed out: "That's what's happening in Detroit. For the unions, they actually have a stake, because they own a portion of the corporation, they're on the other side." Rob answered: "Of course

they are.”

In Australia as in the US, the unions are the key enforcers for the corporate destruction of jobs and attacks on workers’ living conditions. The unions brokered a deal earlier this month cutting wages and tearing up workplace conditions for General Motors Holden workers in Elizabeth, South Australia. At Ford, the bureaucracy is working to deliver yet another “orderly closure,” suppressing any resistance among the workforce.

Several workers spoke about their fears over the impact of the Ford closure for the wider area. Broadmeadows already has an official unemployment rate of nearly 15 percent, and has been devastated by the restructuring of the manufacturing industry orchestrated by the Labor government.

“I don’t know what the future is for us,” one worker explained. “Now we can’t sleep. We’re thinking about what’s going to happen or the next day. We don’t know what’s going to happen. What about the workers with families to provide for?”

Alex said: “I’m really worried about this. I don’t want it to happen. I feel sorry, especially, for the people who have a family and a mortgage.” He continued: “They talk about globalisation—I’m against globalisation because that’s the one thing that’s going to kill the industry here. Workers lose their jobs and their wages.”

White explained: “We think the struggles of workers have to be globalised. Because the companies are global, the working class has to unite all over the world.” Alex said: “All over the world. That’s right. I agree.”

Chris, summed up the bitter anger toward the government and the unions among a layer of workers at the Broadmeadows plant. “What about the union!” he exclaimed. “This union is not doing anything. They’re not doing anything to the fringe-benefits tax or the plant closure. The union is in the pocket of Ford and the Labor Party ... In your literature you must make sure to bag the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union. The union officials are all Labor backers, with ambitions to get a career in the Labor Party.”

Chris asked Patrick O’Connor what he thought about the unions and about what the SEP thought should be done to oppose the closure. “We’re fighting for workers to break with the unions and build new

organisations, rank-and-file committees in the plant here, in Geelong, at Holden, at workplaces in every industry,” the SEP candidate replied. He explained the need to turn to other sections of workers and develop an industrial and political campaign against the Labor government on the basis of a socialist program.

Chris listened carefully and asked if there was a rank-and-file committee already established that he could join, and whether there was a committee at the Holden plant. “There isn’t,” O’Connor replied. “That’s got to be built. Here it needs to be built by you and other workers.”

Jerry White spoke with WSWs reporters after the campaign. “There was a keen interest among the Ford workers in the conditions of the working class in the United States,” he noted. “Workers were clearly following the situation in Detroit. Many were aware of the city’s bankruptcy. It was striking, the absolute similarity of the problems confronting Australian workers and workers in the United States. Like the working class in the US, or in Europe, the main obstacle to a fight against the transnational auto companies and their shutdown of plants and cuts in wages, is the trade union apparatus, which is dedicated to the defence of corporate profit.

“Many workers I spoke with were asking, how do we unite, how do we conduct a fight? Our party is alone in fighting to unify the common struggles of workers, in opposition to the nationalism of the trade unions. The workers in Australia, the US, Europe face the same struggle, the same conditions, and the only way forward is through a fight based on an international and socialist strategy.”

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