

# Socialist Alliance and the destruction of Australian car industry jobs

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The announcement by General Motors Holden (GMH) on December 11 that it will end production in Australia, following a similar decision by Ford, sets the stage for the closure of the entire auto industry in Australia. The response of the various pseudo-left organisations reveals both their utter contempt for the tens of thousands of workers who will be affected and their support for the trade unions that are overseeing the plant closures.

Socialist Alternative, which is a slavish defender of the trade union apparatus, has, as yet, not bothered to comment on the GMH closure. The Socialist Party, whose leader Stephen Jolly sits on the inner Melbourne Yarra Council, has likewise maintained a deafening silence.

Socialist Alliance, the publisher of *Green Left Weekly*, issued a perfunctory nine-paragraph statement on December 13. It called for “the immediate nationalisation of General Motors Holden (GMH) plants under workers’ and community control” and for them to be “re-tooled to produce wind turbines and other equipment for renewable energy production.”

The fraudulent and cynical character of this left-sounding rhetoric is exposed by the fact that a prominent member of Socialist Alliance, Tim Gooden, is part of the trade union apparatus that is actively assisting the closure of the Ford plant in the regional Victorian city of Geelong. That is the real content of Socialist Alliance’s appeal for “urgent action by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) and the manufacturing unions.”

Gooden is secretary of the Geelong Trades Hall Council, the umbrella organisation for unions in the city. Last May, after Ford announced it was terminating production in both Geelong and Broadmeadows in Melbourne in 2016, he was appointed head of a

“taskforce” managing \$20 million in state and federal government funding allocated as part of bogus “transition” and “retraining” schemes for Ford workers. The appointment underscored Socialist Alliance’s close connections with both the union bureaucracy and the Labor Party.

Announcing the taskforce, which involves various “business and community leaders,” federal Labor MP for the Geelong area Richard Marles declared: “There is a sense of confidence that the civic leadership will do whatever it can. Team Geelong is a space above politics.” The *Geelong Advertiser* quoted Gooden saying that “getting leaders together in a matter of hours was a rare thing, which showed how the community could work together for the best outcome.”

In promoting car workers’ enemies—corporate executives and government officials—as valued “community” members, Gooden sought to prevent any independent movement by Ford workers in defence of their jobs. Among Gooden’s stated responsibilities as head of the taskforce was to “liaise with Ford management and unions to ease workers’ concerns”—in other words, neutralise and suppress any opposition to the destruction of jobs by sowing illusions that they will be assisted to find alternate livelihoods.

The so-called transition and retraining schemes established when Mitsubishi closed in Adelaide in 2008 were a sham. Five years later, hundreds of sacked car workers are either unemployed, forced into early retirement or working on lower wages. This is now being replicated at Ford in Geelong and Broadmeadows, and GMH in Melbourne and Adelaide.

The participation of the unions and their pseudo-left defenders in the shutdown of the plants is the culmination of three decades in which they have worked to impose the dictates of globally-organised

finance and corporations on the working class. From the time of the Hawke Labor government's Button Car Plan in the 1980s, the unions have collaborated with the auto conglomerates to impose mass sackings and drive up productivity and profits, in the name of making Australian workers "internationally competitive" against workers in other countries.

The same process has taken place in every sector of the economy. The outcome is a social disaster for the working class. Massive restructuring has been carried out in the car industry internationally since the onset of the global economic crisis in 2008—above all via savage cost-cutting imposed on workers in the United States. Auto corporations are now writing off their Australian operations altogether. Despite workers in Australia suffering major job losses and cuts to working conditions over the past five years, production costs are still significantly higher than in low-wage manufacturing centres in Asia and the US itself. The pursuit of "international competitiveness" has been a race to the bottom for workers everywhere, entirely for the benefit of corporate profits.

Toyota, the third and largest car producer in Australia, is also reviewing its operations. Industry analysts expect it to announce the shutdown of its assembly plant in Melbourne later this year. Some 50,000 jobs are directly threatened if the car plants close, as component suppliers will respond with sackings and closures. As many as 150,000 jobs would be lost as the impact flowed into every sector of the economy. The car industry's liquidation is already being exploited by the corporate elite to demand that workers in other industries accept cuts to wages and working conditions, or see their jobs eliminated.

Gooden's role makes manifestly clear that Socialist Alliance is working hand in hand with the union apparatus to suppress any opposition by workers. Its slogan of "immediate nationalisation" is not directed to the working class but at providing a left cover for the union bureaucracy as it organises the closure of the car industry with management and the government. It is to foster the illusion that a solution to job destruction is possible within the framework of the Australian national state and without an international struggle against capitalism.

Socialist Alliance articulates the attitudes of a middle-class social layer—union officials, academics and

professionals—who are integrated into the political establishment and deeply hostile to any independent struggle by the working class. Socialist Alliance has vested interests in maintaining union control over workers and has cultivated relations with the Greens, an explicitly pro-capitalist party, in order to pursue positions in parliament and local government.

The claim that former car plants could be "re-tooled" to produce wind turbines and so on is a version of the Greens' policy. They responded to GMH's announcement by calling for a "multi-party, multi-stakeholder summit" to "develop a sustainable manufacturing future." Such statements are code words for the Greens' demand that "polluting" industries like car production be mothballed and government assistance provided to develop "green" industries. In other words, both the Greens and Socialist Alliance accept the closure of the car industry, with the destruction of tens of thousands of jobs, and regard it as a progressive development.

A defence of jobs is impossible within the framework of the trade unions. What is necessary is a rebellion against the unions and the formation of new, independent organisations such as rank-and-file committees that turn out to other sections of workers and forge a common struggle by car workers across Australia and around the world.

This involves a political struggle against all the defenders of the bankrupt capitalist system—the Liberal-National Coalition, Labor, the Greens, the trade unions and, above all, their pseudo-left apologists and defenders—on the basis of an internationalist and socialist perspective. Workers' governments must be established to reorganise society from top to bottom along socialist lines. The banks and major corporations must be placed under public ownership and the democratic control of the working class to meet the pressing needs of the majority of humanity, not the profits of the ultra-rich. The Socialist Equality Party alone fights for this perspective.



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