

Australia: SEP campaigns among Toyota workers

A reporting team
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Socialist Equality Party (SEP) supporters campaigned this week at Toyota's Altona plant in Melbourne as part of the fight to defend jobs and conditions in the car industry.

Using a loud hailer, SEP Melbourne branch secretary Will Marshall addressed workers leaving the plant, which employs about 3,000 people. Hundreds of copies of a WSWs leaflet "Australia's auto closures pose need for a global workers' strategy" were taken by the car workers.

The Altona plant manufactures about 105,000 vehicles annually, a large proportion of these being exported to the Middle East. The facility commenced operations in 1995, following the closure of older plants at Dandenong and Port Melbourne, where hundreds of jobs were destroyed. Known as a "greenfields site," Toyota's Altona plant eliminated long-established working conditions to maximise productivity and profit.

Toyota responded to announcements last year by Ford and General Motors that they would end all Australian production, in 2016 and 2017 respectively, by stepping up its cost-cutting measures.

In December, the company attempted to have Altona workers vote on a revised enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) that stripped away overtime and allowance wage benefits, as well as other workplace protections (see: "Toyota exploits GM shutdown to bolster wage-cutting drive").

While the vote was blocked by the Fair Work Australia tribunal, the multi-billion dollar car corporation company is still demanding \$3,800 per vehicle be slashed from production costs or it will axe the Altona plant. Toyota is expected to announce in June whether or not it will maintain production in Australia.

Rather than defend jobs or conditions, the major concern of the Australia Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU)—the main union covering car workers—is that Toyota is "unilaterally" imposing its agenda. The union

has called for the company to adopt a "co-operative approach," in other words, utilise the union, as GM previously did, to slash costs.

Addressing workers, Will Marshall explained the need for Toyota workers to adopt an internationalist strategy to defend jobs and conditions.

Marshall condemned the AMWU, declaring: "The unions enforce the dictates of the government and the companies—they are working together. The union claims that if you sacrifice conditions, Toyota will be competitive. The AMWU worked with GM to cut \$200 a week in entitlements. The union wants to do the same with Toyota."

One Toyota worker walked near to the SEP speaker and exclaimed: "That's exactly right!"

Marshall said the car companies had an international strategy, and workers had to organise globally as well. He urged Toyota workers to form rank-and-file committees to organise a united defence of jobs with GM and Ford workers and reach out to car workers internationally in Europe, the US and China for support.

"You are not alone," Marshall said. "Car workers around the world in the US, Germany, South Korea are facing the same situation. Melbourne Toyota workers need to unite with workers to turn back the assault of the global car corporations."

Workers voiced their concerns to SEP campaigners about the attacks on jobs, wages and conditions.

Mike said: "Toyota will try everything they can to get the [new enterprise] agreement through. It thinks what we get paid is the luxury life... They want you to work for peanuts. The company wants cheap labour."

Vince warned: "If Japan pulls the pin there'll be nothing left. They make millions of dollars profit. It's a lot of money but they want even more—they're really greedy and they want to cut everything. And if the company closes down, they'll blame it on the workers."

“We had a mass meeting before Christmas with a company executive. He was saying you have to put in, we can’t guarantee your future. He told us, ‘If you vote against us, we’ll close down.’ The afternoon shift started booing him. He said anyone who wanted to leave should come and see him later. There’s real frustration in the workforce.

“What they did to the workers in Detroit, is what they’re trying to do now here. Previously it’s been very hard to get terminated. Now they want one, two, three and you’re out.”

Vince raised concerns over Toyota’s casualisation of the workforce: “They’ll replace us with contracted workers on \$19 an hour. They get no annual leave, no long-service leave. Where does it stop?”

Malco I m, who has worked at the plant for seven years, said: “There’s been a lot of changes here. People were more relaxed before but now a lot of senior people have gone. All up, about 500 have gone over the last few years and the company brought in about 100 new contract workers about a year ago. You just don’t know what will happen in the future. That’s a pressure on workers all the time. In reducing costs, it’s always the workers who bear this.”

A Toyota spare parts worker explained the increasing exploitation in the plant. “Many of the workers have been here for at least 10 years,” he said. “We used to almost always get overtime, any day of the week. This meant that the base wage of about \$57,000 could be supplemented.

“Many families were based on an income which included penalty rates, but now penalty rates as a whole are being cut back by the firm. The company now also issues warnings far more often than it did previously. Workers can face being taken aside and spoken to for being 30 seconds late after a break.”

The spare parts worker said up to 300 workers on short-term contracts were working in the plant. “Previously, after working for two- to three-month stints, these people would be put on as permanents. The company is not doing this now.”

A welder for 12 years at the plant added: “It’s obvious that the company is trying to improve ‘efficiency’ and pressure us to vote to decrease our wages. They’re demanding a reduction of wages now or in the next EBA. Even if they don’t decrease the hourly rate, they’ll want to cut overtime rates for weekends. I think that in three years Toyota might follow Holden and Ford.

“A lot of the older guys don’t have a choice because they can’t keep up [with new production demands].

Things have gotten a lot harder since the last redundancies in 2012, when they got rid of 350 employees. There are more jobs that you have to do in less and less time. I think they’re trying to get rid of the old guys, and get new people who they pay only \$19 per hour. The older guys get \$29 per hour.”

Pointing to the devastating consequences of Toyota ending production in Australia, he continued: “The shutdown of the auto industry would impact the whole country. Not just the plants, it would hit the suppliers and everything. There are over 100,000 people that it’s going to affect.”

Altona workers have closely followed the demands made last year on car workers at GM’s Holden plant in Elizabeth. GM put a gun to their heads and, with the union’s assistance, forced them to agree to give up basic workplace protections. A few months later, the company announced it would shut down.

Toyota workers told SEP campaigners that they would not accept any deal that lowered wages and conditions because they could face the same outcome as GM employees.

Frank, who has 10 years’ experience in the car industry, said: “When we heard that GM was closing workers were shocked. We rejected outright the demands in the EBA for wage cuts but since then there’s been no communication about what is going to happen.

“They are just wearing us down hoping that we will just quit and leave on our own. The union have said nothing to us. Since day one, the union has been working with the company.”



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