

Australian government intervenes against Toyota workers

Will Morrow
30 January 2014

The Coalition government of Prime Minister Tony Abbott announced on Tuesday night that it would make a submission to the Federal Court supporting Toyota's efforts to force its workforce to vote on major cuts to their wages and conditions.

Last December, Toyota sought to push through a revised Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA) that included cuts to overtime and allowance payments and other workplace protections at the company's Altona plant in the state of Victoria. The company has put a gun to workers' heads, declaring that unless it can secure savings of \$3,800 per vehicle assembled, it will cease manufacturing operations in Australia.

Toyota's plans were temporarily delayed by a Federal Court ruling on December 12 that accepted an Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) argument that the workforce would first have to approve changing the existing EBA before voting on a revised agreement.

Toyota's closure threat was made the same week that General Motors Holden (GMH) announced that it would shut its plants in Adelaide and Melbourne in 2017. Ford, the third auto manufacturer in Australia, announced last May it would shut down its plants in Melbourne and Geelong in 2016.

Even as the government works with Toyota to pressure workers to accept cuts, it is dressing up its actions with an utterly fraudulent "democratic" veneer. Employment Minister Eric Abetz declared that the workers should have the "right" to vote on the new EBA. The government hopes that pressuring Toyota workers' to accept cuts to wages and conditions will set a benchmark for attacks on workers across manufacturing.

Abetz derided what he called "restrictive clauses" in the existing agreement, including a 21-day Christmas

shutdown period, the 10 days' additional annual leave for union delegates, and a half-work day for the final day before shutdown. He told the Sydney Institute: "These clauses shouldn't have been in the agreement."

Abetz's statements followed similar comments from other federal ministers and the media. Treasurer Joe Hockey declared last week that the AMWU's use of the Federal Court to halt a vote meant it had put itself "at war" with Toyota. Industry Minister Ian MacFarlane declared last weekend that workers needed to accept the scrapping of an "archaic workplace practice system." The media has similarly denounced Toyota workers for not accepting the company's demands.

The Federal Court is due to issue a ruling in February. In the meantime, the government, company and the trade union are conspiring behind workers' backs to reach a sell-out agreement. The federal and Victorian state governments plan to hold round-table talks on February 13 with Toyota and the AMWU.

The claim that the AMWU is opposed to the government-corporate agenda is no less fraudulent than Abetz's claims that he is concerned with workers' "rights." The AMWU has requested only that Toyota not act "unilaterally," but instead negotiate cuts with union officials.

AMWU National Secretary Paul Bastian reaffirmed the union's willingness to impose cost-cutting in an interview with ABC Radio on Wednesday. "Every time there has been a difficult issue to deal with in the auto industry, whether it's been declines, whether it's been down-days [or] loss of volumes, auto workers have been able to reach agreement. The proof of that ... was at Holden," he declared.

Last year, the AMWU assisted Holden management to pressure workers at its assembly plant in Elizabeth,

near Adelaide, into voting for major cuts to wages and conditions declared necessary to keep the plant open. When Holden proceeded to announce that it would be closed regardless, the union immediately stepped forward to help organise an “orderly closure,” as it is doing at Ford.

At Toyota, the union is attempting to blind workers to the reality they confront. Summing up the AMWU’s pro-corporate outlook, Paul Bastian declared: “The decline of this industry rests solely with this government and no one else.” This is a lie. The destruction of the auto industry is the result of the agenda of the major transnational car companies, and the financial institutions and hedge funds that control them, which have responded to the 2008 global breakdown of capitalism by carrying out a ruthless assault on the conditions of workers in every part of the globe.

In each country, the auto companies have relied upon national governments and trade unions to enforce their demands for “international competitiveness,” pitting workers against their class brothers and sisters internationally in a race without a finishing line.

The same Toyota Camry model produced at the Altona plant is manufactured by eight other factories internationally, including at the massive Kentucky plant in the United States, where wages are barely \$15 an hour. Toyota Australia is expected to release its decision in June as to whether it will continue production at Altona, which will be contingent on whether workers’ conditions can be lowered to be “competitive” with operations in other countries.

The obstacle to the corporate-government-union agenda at Toyota is the resistance of Altona workers themselves. Workers at the plant have told SEP campaigners that they are well aware of what happened to their Holden counterparts. They correctly recognise that any cuts they agree to would be soon followed by further demands in the never-ending corporate pursuit of increased profits. The EBA imposed on workers by the union in 2011—which Toyota now decries as unacceptable—included significant give-backs by workers, and followed the imposition of real wage cuts and shorter working hours in 2008 and 2011.

Workers at Toyota should oppose the demand for concessions from the company and the union. Having done so, however, they will be immediately confronted

with the threat of a shutdown of the plants. This poses the necessity for workers to carry out their own counteroffensive, in unity with workers at Ford and GMH and their counterparts in the United States, Europe and Asia, against all closures and cuts to wages and conditions.

Such a struggle can only be carried forward on the basis of a complete break from the AMWU, which functions as the direct agent and industrial police force for the companies. Workers should organise independently of the union, through the formation of rank-and-file committees, and call for support from auto and other manufacturing workers in Australia and internationally. Above all, what is needed is a new political strategy, based on the fight for a workers’ government and the socialist reorganisation of society on the basis of social need, rather than private profit.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact