

Socialist Equality Party campaigns against Toyota Australia shutdown

Our reporters
22 February 2014

Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members and supporters campaigned throughout last week among auto workers at Toyota's Altona plant in Melbourne, Victoria, as part of the fight to halt the shutdown of the entire Australian auto industry.

Toyota earlier this month announced that it will follow Ford and General Motors Holden—the only two other car makers in Australia—in shutting down its Australian operations by 2017. The elimination of the auto sector will destroy up to 50,000 jobs in the assembly plants—including 2,500 at Toyota's Altona factory—as well as the parts component manufacturing facilities that depend upon the assembly plants. Overall, as many as 200,000 jobs linked to the car industry are at risk.

SEP supporters spoke to workers coming onto and going off morning and afternoon shifts at the Altona plant, distributing thousands of copies of a *World Socialist Web Site* perspective “Australian car industry closure: a warning to workers internationally.”

On Thursday, an SEP member addressed workers on a loudhailer. “The Altona plant cannot be allowed to shut down,” he said. “It is not too late to conduct a struggle. The union says that nothing can be done, because the AMWU [Australian Manufacturing Workers Union] is in the pockets of the company. The union officials support the shutdown at Holden, Ford and Toyota...”

“In every country, the same agenda is being carried out by the same global auto corporations to turn the clock back to conditions of the 1930s. In the United States, newly-hired auto workers are paid less than \$15 per hour, while plants are being shut down in Belgium, Germany and across Europe. Workers across Australia, at Holden, Ford, the parts assembly plants, and across manufacturing are confronting the same agenda. A

socialist perspective to unite the working class in Australia and internationally is needed.”

The SEP campaign met with a warm response from Toyota workers, many of whom bitterly denounced the AMWU for its collaboration with the company, and expressed deep concern about the impact of the closures for the entire working class.

The workers spoke anonymously for fear of being victimised by the company. A worker in Toyota's engine division, who has been at the factory for 14 years, told SEP campaigners: “I think the union and the company are together. Whenever the company announces something, they [the union] don't say anything. We're the ones paying them from our wages, and they keep increasing the dues all the time.

“The union always meets privately with the company so you wouldn't have a clue what they're talking about. They always say they're trying to help out the company, because it's in a loss, so they have to cut jobs. It's always the same argument. And in the end, thousands of workers have to go.”

Asked about the federal government's calls for wage cuts at Toyota and across the manufacturing sector, the worker added: “I'm opposed to the Abbott government. The government says that the wages we're getting are very high. They don't compare with the cost of living: food, petrol, everything is so high that we can't afford to go shopping. I can't even plan ahead a few years because I can only afford to live day-by-day. It's so hard for the middle wage-earners now. It's not as easy as before, when things were cheaper. I don't know how the next generation will survive. It's going to be really, really hard.”

Another worker commented: “Things are changing here. We're going the same way as the United States.” Asked about the union's role, he said: “At Toyota, they

didn't even think of opposing the company's decision. We didn't get any updates from the union. They just straight away started to negotiate on how they were going to shut the plant down. They're running the union like a business. There's nothing else attached to it besides money. That's the only thing the union officials worry about."

A worker from Toyota's paint division said: "The union and the company work together. We always knew that they did, even when things were going better, we knew it." He pointed to the enormous speedups imposed by the company and the union over the past 12 months: "Some guys can't take it anymore, they're fed up with all this bulls--t. They put so much pressure on you now and time every movement you make—even going to the toilet. They give you seven minutes for number one and ten for number two."

He added: "Alcoa [an aluminum smelter in Geelong, Victoria] just shut. All the jobs are going. Where are we going to get work? What about the Asians who are working in the paint division with me? They can't speak English. Where will they ever get another job?"

Another worker dismissed the "transition" retraining schemes promoted by the government, the Labor Party and the unions. "I don't think it's going to happen," he said. "If you're over 45-years-old it will be very hard to be retrained. I'm working on the power train—are they going to send me to a TAFE course?"

The worker commented: "The announcement has had a big impact around the world. No one thought Toyota would close. I was getting calls from my relatives in the Middle East asking what's going on. It's about the company's profits. Regardless of how much profit they make, it's not enough. They want us to work for peanuts; the government wants us to work for peanuts. They don't care. It's only the rich and the poor today—they're destroying the middle class. The previous Labor government was the same."

A worker in Toyota's warehousing division, with more than a decade of experience, described the personal toll of the threatened closure on workers. "I'm very worried in the future," he said. "I'm depressed. This job was my life. Now, I'm trying to get another job and I have to prepare myself. I'm preparing to lose my house, because I can't afford it if I don't find a better job. Life is not like before. It's changing. Every day I'm worried. They say we have four years [before

the closure], but you don't know. They might tell us we're finished in six months. It hurts—it hurts me, my family, my kids. I think all the employees are in the same situation."

He continued: "Most employees are worried about being sacked before 2017. They were originally going to shut down for one week over the Easter break, now they're going to shut down for two weeks. They might use the break to slow down production so they can lay off more people. That's the rumour in the plant."

The warehouse worker was highly critical of the union. "The senior shop steward took a package late last year and left the company. Now that he's left, we've heard the news about the closure. My suspicion is that he knew earlier that the company would close."

"It's very hard to trust the union and what they say," he continued. "Personally, I don't believe the union represents the workers. In the last four to five years, the union has become even shiftier. They tell you something, and what happens in the workplace is different. There are negotiations, they say they're winning something, but we lose a lot. It seems like all the union does is collect money from the workers."

Asked to comment on the SEP's campaign, the worker responded: "A lot of times when I get your email [bulletin] I read it and learn a lot of things from it. It's in our interest to be united... I think we have to get rid of capitalism. It's not easy, but I think it has to happen."



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