

Australian UGL workers condemn union's role in retrenchments

Mike Head
21 September 2015

A Socialist Equality Party leaflet attacking the new wave of job cuts being implemented by UGL, an Australian-based engineering and services company, won an appreciative response among workers at UGL's Auburn railway workshops in Sydney last week.

"What you say is true" was a common response from workers at the gate last Friday morning when asked for their comments on the SEP statement, "UGL workers face deepening job cuts in Australia and Asia," which was distributed at the plant earlier in the week.

The statement reported that in June, UGL chief executive Ross Taylor pledged to the financial markets to quickly retrench 200 full-time employees and remove "duplicated jobs" as part of a ruthless restructuring of the company amid the deepening impact of the global financial crisis and the collapse of Australia's mining boom.

Workers in India were being retrenched as well, the statement revealed, through UGL's withdrawal from a joint venture locomotive manufacturing facility at Belgharia, in the city of Kolkata.

The SEP statement also exposed the role of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), which covers many UGL workers. The union has kept its members in the dark about the sackings and closures at five other railway workshops around Australia since 2012, axing at least 650 jobs. It has assisted the company to implement these job losses.

One UGL worker commented: "What you have said is true. The union has been working with the company for some time. Like when we discussed the last EBA [enterprise bargaining agreement], the union never talked about the things that we would lose, and that would hurt us later on. The union never gave us enough time to read the draft EBA before we had to vote on it."

Together with many others at the Auburn facility, the

UGL worker was concerned that more retrenchments were being prepared. "A lot more job cuts are coming. Everything looks like that. It seems that UGL is being made to look nice and tidy, with all overheads cut, maybe for a takeover."

He commented on the fact, reported in the SEP statement, that UGL was nearly 60 percent owned by four bank-run investment funds—Citicorp Nominees, JP Morgan Nominees, National Nominees and HSBC Custody Nominees.

"I didn't realise quite a few things I read in your leaflet. Then I went online to check UGL's web site, and I found that what you said was correct. I knew that the finance houses control everything, but I didn't realise that they own UGL. This discussion is very educational."

Another worker commented: "Your leaflet is pretty good. It's made us aware of what's happening. A lot of us didn't know much about UGL, and the union didn't tell us... I'm surprised how much we didn't know, and I've been working here for more than 20 years!"

"We've pretty much been reduced to labour-hire. The company doesn't want to make anyone permanent. Some workers here have been casuals for years, even though the EBA says they are meant to be made permanent after nine months."

He said workers had felt "helpless" in the past because they would ask the union to fight the cuts and it "did nothing." At a membership meeting on site last week, the AMWU acting state secretary Steve Murphy had "snuffed out" a call for action to fight the latest retrenchments.

Murphy strenuously opposed a call by angry workers for a vote to sit in the sheds until the company agreed to reinstate workers who had contested their retrenchment, until the redundancy dispute was settled.

Instead, Murphy went into talks with management that resulted only in two workers being granted a formal appeal under the EBA process.

This correspondent replied that the union's opposition to any struggle was related to its public partnership with UGL and other employers in a reactionary protectionist "save our rail jobs" campaign, urging governments to allocate contracts to nominally "Australian" companies, not "the Indian, Korean, Chinese and United States rail industries." Their nationalist campaign effectively pitted workers in Australia against their fellow workers in China and elsewhere around the world.

The worker commented: "Yes, we can't localise the struggle. We live in a world of 'global free trade,' so it's logical that workers have to fight on a global front. That's the sensible way to go."

This worker was also unimpressed by last week's switch in the Liberal-National government to replace Tony Abbott as prime minister and install Malcolm Turnbull. "It's the whole political system that's rotten. Both Labor and Liberal are pretty much the same."

Another worker said: "A lot of guys are talking about your leaflet... It's not just digging at the company, but also the union. I like the idea. Liberal and Labor are not fit for government and it's good to see another party in the arena, rather than all these pushing capitalist interests... I'm all ears!"

"It's pretty confronting to see who owns this company. This mob has been parasitic from the start. They sponged and leeches their way into existence. They spooned off government contracts, but now those contracts are getting tighter and tighter..."

"We are being kept in the dark by the union. It doesn't look like it's fighting for jobs. They just asked us to agree to a 'job swap' that allowed UGL to shut down the Chullora workshop. That was only opening the door to more redundancies."

Initially, this worker was influenced by the national trade union television ad blitz against the China-Australia Free Trade Agreement (ChAFTA). The union campaign, closely coordinated with the Labor Party, is directed against allowing Chinese workers into Australia to work on Chinese-financed major projects, depicting this as a defence of "Australian jobs."

The worker had said he thought this would be a means of protecting jobs and conditions for workers in

Australia. After further discussion, however, he agreed that Chinese workers faced the same basic problems as those in Australia. "If Chinese workers come here, they will only be trying to put food on their tables," he said.

He also welcomed the distribution of the SEP statement "An internationalist strategy to oppose the China-Australia Free Trade Agreement," which explains that the SEP opposes the ChAFTA pact from the standpoint of unifying the working class in Australia, China and around the world against the attacks on jobs, wages and working conditions being produced by the worsening crisis of global capitalism.

At UGL and throughout the working class, the SEP is advancing the need for workers to make a conscious political break from Labor and the unions, and establish genuine rank-and-file committees that will fight on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective to defend the jobs, wages and conditions of all workers. We encourage workers at UGL and elsewhere to contact us for discussion.



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