

Australian Toyota workers support US auto workers' struggle

Our correspondents

12 October 2015

Australian Toyota workers at the Altona plant in Melbourne have expressed support for the stand taken by Fiat-Chrysler workers in the US, who voted “No” to a contract proposed by the company and the United Auto Workers union that perpetuates two-tier wage structures, threatens their health care and sets the stage for plant closures and job losses.

Toyota workers face immense problems of their own. At the end of 2017, the Altona plant will be mothballed and more than 2,000 jobs eliminated. The closure of the company is part of the shutdown of the entire Australian car industry, with Ford ending production in October 2016 and General Motors Holden in December 2017. Dozens of parts manufacturers and other suppliers are also shutting down or carrying out massive restructuring and downsizing. Anywhere between 150,000 and 200,000 jobs will be eliminated due to the flow-on effect of the destruction of the industry.

As their American counterparts will understand all too well, the Australian car workers have come under enormous pressure from the companies, the government and, above all, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, to accept the closure of the industry and the destruction of their livelihoods as a fait accompli that cannot be fought.

The AMWU, which covers car workers, functions as part of Toyota management. It is overseeing the so-called “orderly closure” of the plant and ensuring that production is maintained throughout the process. Vacancies are being filled by young workers who are hired on six-month contracts and paid just \$21 an hour compared with \$30 for entry-level permanents.

The stand taken by workers in the US, in defiance of all the pressure brought to bear upon them to ratify the contract, provides a powerful demonstration that the

company-government-union agenda can, indeed, be fought.

WSWS teams have been regularly distributing leaflets at the Altona plant, providing information about the Fiat Chrysler contract struggle and seeking to develop a discussion on the independent perspective needed to defend jobs and prevent the plant shutdowns.

Over the weekend, workers commented on both the US “no” vote and the conditions at Toyota. Those who have recently left the plant also talked to WSWS correspondents. Due to concerns about possible victimisation, workers’ asked that their names not be published.

A longstanding worker at Toyota, said: “I agree with what these workers have done in the US, to take a stand. It’s important because they’ve had everyone against them and yet they said no.

“Toyota has actually made millions of dollars in profit in the last year. How can they just keep saying to us we have to sacrifice our conditions when they’re pocketing it in? The rich want to get richer, the poor get poorer. How much money do they want to make?”

After discussing the fact that workers in the US had not had meaningful pay rises for years and that they worked under a two-tier wages system, he commented: “It’s the same thing here, we can’t live on our wages as costs keep going up and up.

“You should see how many contractors there are at the moment. They’re on \$21 an hour! [compared with over \$30 an hour for a permanent] They’re busting their chops for less money. Each time they come in, you have to train them and teach them about safety. Once they start, they struggle to do the work and then they find out the guy next to him is earning almost double what they’re getting and they think, ‘stuff that.’ At the same time, they’re asking for people to

accept [redundancy] voluntary packages, which is a pathetic three weeks wages per year of service.

“Workers are always told [by the company and the union] that if you do anything, we’ll move elsewhere. If workers in other countries take up a fight and go on strike, they’ll use everything they can to stop us from taking up the same strike action. I don’t disagree with taking up a struggle internationally but I think many workers are scared to do it.”

A young contract worker, told WSWS correspondents as he left the plant last Friday: “It is right for American workers to reject the contract. Lower second-tier wages are affecting the livelihood of a lot of people, and also their family members.”

A permanent worker, said: “The No vote in the [US] is because the union and company are working together. The union is not helping the members at all.

“Here, we are paying our membership and the unions are not helping us either. We have to find out what is going on. Why are they helping the closure? They only tell us fairy tales.

“In the United States, all the members have to be united. They should mind what the union is doing and find out what they need to know. The union is supposed to be transparent to all the members. For years we heard rumours that Toyota would close in a few years, and then the rumours came true.”

Another worker said: “The company and the union work together—what’s the difference between them? The union, the government and Toyota, they’ve signed the papers to close.

“We are just a number to them. No-one listens to us. It is not only Toyota, look at Ford—they have only got 20 percent left of the workforce. What is the union doing about that?

“Good for the US car workers, they are fighting for their rights.”

A former Toyota worker who accepted a redundancy and left the plant, told the WSWS: “The US autoworkers are doing the right thing. It will have an impact on workers here. Workers have to stand up for themselves.

“While I worked at Toyota, the conditions changed a lot. After Toyota got rid of the first batch of 350 workers [in 2012], the union left every man for himself. The union was working for the company. It wasn’t giving any information unless it was company PR

[public relations].

“I left because they are shutting down and I felt under a lot of stress. My wife was having a baby and the company was giving me grief. I spoke to the union representative for time off to help my wife and they said: ‘You’re not going to get anything.’

“I worked a month-and-a-half for a tyre company. I was paid just \$590 a week. That’s half what I got at Toyota and I had to do more hours. The decline in the Australian economy will give the companies more of an excuse to cut wages.

“Workers in the US don’t know what is happening here. I think it would be a good idea if people unified. It does have to be an international struggle. Toyota is opening a plant in Indonesia because of cheaper wages. In China, workers are being paid \$1.25 a day and whole families live in one bedroom. Workers have no rights. We have to have a rebellion. They are all against us.”

A worker who has been at Toyota for seven years also pointed to the similarities between the US and the two-tier wage structure now in place at Altona: “Toyota is employing new contractors, I know they are on lower wages and I don’t think that’s fair for them that they do the same job as us and get less wages.

“I think the union agreed to all this a long time ago. We opposed the EBA [workplace contract] the year before they announced the closures, but it made no difference. Whether we said yes or no to the cutbacks, the union had already agreed to a shut down.

“They tell you ‘you have no choice.’ The union just gave us a leaflet and said ‘there’s nothing you can do, you have to accept it.’ The union is supposed to support us, but they don’t.

“Here they’re already trying to get us to work double for the same wage. We have many people taking sick days because the work is too difficult. There aren’t enough workers most days, because workers are getting sick.

“We need a new system to defend our jobs. It’s important what they have done in the US. We have to let other workers know about it.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact