

Australia: Ipswich workers denounce elimination of hundreds of jobs

Our correspondents
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Working-class people in the Queensland city of Ipswich are bitter about the loss of nearly 1,000 jobs through the closure of two meat processing plants, and the fact that the job destruction is being directly assisted by the state's Labor government and the meat industry trade union.

About 270 Churchill Abattoir workers were retrenched from the plant on September 28 and 29, when the slaughter and boning rooms closed, just weeks after the company announced the shutdown. More than 300 further workers will be out of a job next year when the same happens at the plant's case-ready, sausage and corning rooms, which are run by Woolworths, one of Australia's two large supermarket chains.

Up to 400 more workers are scheduled to lose their jobs next year when Baiada, one of the country's biggest chicken meat processors, closes its Steggles plant at Wulkuraka, another Ipswich suburb, less than seven kilometres from the Churchill facility.

These job losses are a severe blow to workers in the city, a predominantly working class regional centre of some 200,000 people about 40 kilometres west of Brisbane, the state capital. Even according to understated official statistics, the unemployment rate in Ipswich was already 8 percent in July—one of the worst levels in Australia and well above the national average of 5.6 percent. Almost 8,000 workers in Ipswich are currently counted as being unemployed—that is, working less than an hour a week.

What the regional newspaper, the *Queensland Times*, dubs the “ripple effect” from the closures will affect thousands more workers, as well as regional meat and chicken farmers. In the chicken industry alone, the Queensland Chicken Growers Association said 155 purpose-built poultry houses and 80 workers across

southeast Queensland supplied the Steggles facility with about 23 million chickens per year.

The state government of Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk and the Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union (AMIEU) are enforcing the closures, insisting that nothing can or should be done to fight them. Working in tandem with local Labor and federal Liberal-National government authorities, they are promoting illusions that the retrenched workers, many of whom have worked at the plants for years, can simply find jobs elsewhere, despite the high jobless rate.

AMIEU organiser Warren Earle told the *Queensland Times* last week: “There are a lot of government services in place like Centrelink [the federal social security office], superannuation services, counsellors and resume and re-training support to help these people back into a job.”

On September 28, however, Earle admitted that many workers had not found other jobs. “There is still a bit more for us to do in trying to get as many into jobs as possible and putting pressure on the companies not giving them a fair chance,” he told the newspaper.

The state Labor government is peddling the same message, determined to prevent any resistance to the closures, while trying to entice corporate investors to the region on the prospect of a cheap, compliant workforce.

To head off local anger, the Palaszczuk government held a “Working Queensland Cabinet Committee” meeting in Ipswich last week, supposedly with “opportunities to generate new local employment on the table in the wake of recent industry job losses.” No such “opportunities” were specified.

Instead, Acting Premier and Treasurer Curtis Pitt, who chaired the meeting, said the cabinet committee

would be “listening to locals and hearing their ideas for new job opportunities as well as examining how the government’s range of job-creation programs can assist.”

This typifies the methods used for decades, especially by federal and state Labor governments and the trade unions, to enforce sweeping closures by corporate giants in one industry after another, from the car factories to the railways, power plants and coal mines. As many workers have found, the promises of retraining and jobs elsewhere have been completely illusory.

Allan Halliday, a retired waterfront and transport worker, originally from Sydney, condemned the closures. He told the WSWs: “I think it’s wrong. I think profits come first before everything, and the people are suffering because of it. What’s more important? Profits or people having lives, being able to feed their kids and pay their mortgages?”

Halliday was critical of the state Labor government, the Labor Party-dominated city council and the trade unions. “Obviously the Labor government and the Labor council are not doing enough about it... And they’re going crook about people going on the dole. But what are people supposed to do? You can’t feed your family and pay your rent. They are going to find people hanging on trees, because they’ve had a gutful.

“It’s all about profits. I saw it get worse in the transport industry... I had a fair bit to do with the unions in Sydney, but they only paint an image to their liking... Where’s our heroes? The fellows who put themselves on the line? ... We need action to help people.”

Sue Gaunt, a hospitality worker, who has also been a dental nurse and childcare worker, denounced the closures. “It’s taking jobs away from workers who need it,” she said.

“These plants have been here for years... If they want to make profits, they need to look at other avenues, but still keep the meatworks going, and stop taking jobs off people who really need them.

“This is a working class area anyway. It’s going to make it harder for people to live their lives. It’s going to ruin families and cause more heartache if they have to seek government payments... I know a few people who have worked there over the years. People are really, really worried. They have mouths to feed, and they really can’t afford to do that.

“There is no other work around here. Times are really, really tough. People of all ages, both sexes, are trying to find work. These places have provided work for hundreds and hundreds of people.”

Gaunt said that instead of destroying peoples’ lives, their lives should be improved. “Make things better, make working conditions better! They are capable of doing that. And think of the little people for a change, instead of the top-notch people. Why is all this happening? The rich get richer and the poor get poorer. The workers have to fight it.”

A **meatworker**, who wished to remain anonymous, had worked at the meat packing plant adjacent to the Churchill Abattoir for 10 years. He said he was now employed as a part-time casual warehouse worker after being unemployed for nine months. He scoffed at the claims by the government and the unions that the retrenched employees could find work elsewhere. “There is no work around Ipswich,” he said.

The authors also recommend:

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[21 September 2017]



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