

Australia: Ipswich workers condemn hundreds of job losses

Our correspondents
17 October 2017

Residents of Ipswich, a working class city west of the Queensland capital of Brisbane, are angry over the role of the state Labor government and the trade unions in suppressing opposition to the closure of two meat industry plants and the elimination of nearly 1,000 jobs.

About 270 Churchill Abattoir workers were retrenched at the end of last month, when the slaughter and boning rooms closed. About 300 more workers will be thrown out of work next year when Woolworths, a major supermarket chain, shuts the plant's case-ready, sausage and corning rooms. Another 400 workers will lose their jobs in January when Baiada, a big chicken meat processor, closes its Steggles plant at nearby Wulkuraka.

Ipswich, home to about 200,000 people, was once a major coal mining and railway centre. Today, almost 8,000 workers are officially unemployed throughout the city's suburbs.

The state Labor government and the Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union (AMIEU) insist that nothing can be done to fight against the closures. Instead they claim that the retrenched workers should find jobs elsewhere.

While enforcing this job destruction, the Labor and union leaders, and local media outlets, are promoting expanded military production as the answer to the unemployment crisis. This is taking place as part of close integration of Australia into the US preparations for war with North Korea and also with China.

According the Ipswich-based *Queensland Times*: "The fate of the Ipswich job market rests in the federal government's hands. Military manufacturer Rheinmetall Defence Australia is one of two companies in a bidding war for a \$5 billion Australian government Defence contract to build and supply specialised armoured vehicles."

Rheinmetall has supposedly committed to establishing an \$80 million manufacturing centre in Ipswich if its bid to provide the 225 mini-tanks succeeds.

Ipswich hosts the Amberley air force base, one of the country's biggest and critical for any war in the Asia-Pacific.

On October 5, the state government and the city council announced a \$500,000 "regional innovation program" grant to encourage local "student entrepreneurs" and business "startups." The funding is another subsidy for business and underscores Labor's indifference to the economic and social conditions confronting the working class.

At a local shopping centre, **Kelly McCoy**, a casual teacher's aide, told the WSWs the job cuts were "horrifying." She spoke from family experience. "People are getting affected," she said. "My brother-in-law was at the meatworks, then at Steggles. He is now driving a bus as a casual. He has all his tickets but that is all he can get."

McCoy thought there should be a fight against the job destruction. She commented: "Yes if I can help out the workers I will. I'm a worker myself."

Asked about the role of the trade unions, McCoy said: "The unions are getting worse and worse. It's a no-win situation if you join a union. They don't do anything for you and if you do join a union you get targeted."

McCoy commented bitterly on the Labor Party. "The way I used to see it, the Labor Party was for the working class but they have gone like the Liberal Party. They have gone for the corporations now."

The teacher's aide condemned the conditions in the public education system, and particularly the standardised NAPLAN literacy and numeracy testing regime introduced by the former federal Labor

government of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard.

“I am a casual on call,” McCoy said. “I am finding it very hard to get any kind of permanency or contract at the moment. I totally disagree with NAPLAN. I have not seen so many kids so stressed out with going to school ...

“The schools are becoming more computerised. Everything is run on programs, computers and smartboards now. The teachers are having to become the assistants in the class room.”

McCoy added: “A lot of teachers have gone onto contracts now and not the full year. It’s hard work for the teachers as well ... I don’t know how the teachers do it ... We are looking at 30 plus students sometimes in a class, and not under 25.”

Tony, 62, a Steggles labourer and machine operator, said: “After January I don’t have a job, so what do I do? I’m an old fellow, so no one wants to employ me. So for the rest of my time I won’t be working, which will make it very hard.

“I’ve worked at Steggles for four years. Before that, I worked at Dairy Farmers (at Booval, another Ipswich suburb) for 15 years and the same thing happened there—I got made redundant. They built a brand new coldroom and within five years they closed it. I thought I would be there until I retired. It just keeps happening ...

“Steggles is killing 30,000 birds a day at my plant but they must not be making enough profit. The wages aren’t that high!”

Tony expressed contempt for the Labor and union leaders who advised workers they could do nothing except look for other jobs. “It would be a different story if they had to go and do it! A lot of people are abandoning the unions. Everyone used to be in the unions, but not anymore.”

Ken, a coal miner for 37 years, said: “It’s wrong for Ipswich. It’s a struggling town. The coalmines have gone, the railways have gone. Wake up, Labor government and look after the people!

“It’s all the multinationals. It’s all about the dollar ... Multinationals are running the government, telling the government what to do. We vote the governments in to look after the people, but they are looking after the multinationals.

“In the coal industry, I’ve seen it go from 8-hour shifts to 12-hour, 13-hour shifts. We are working a

roster system, not having a family life.

A female worker, who wished to remain anonymous, commented: “It doesn’t affect me personally, but I think it’s disgusting. I do know people who are now out of work through big business just wanting to be greedy and wanting to hire cheaper people offshore or elsewhere ...

“And the government and the council are not doing anything about it either, not standing up and saying: ‘No, you hired these guys, you need to look after them.’ There isn’t work elsewhere! Skilled knife hands can’t just find a job elsewhere. It’s not fair. It’s not good ... It’s pure profit, that’s all. It’s no big conspiracy like some people think. It’s all based on profit.”



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact