

Workers in South Australian city devastated by GM plant closure support US autoworkers' struggle

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A *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team this week visited Elizabeth, a large working-class northern suburb of Adelaide, to ask workers and youth to explain the devastating impact of General Motors' closure of the Holden car assembly plant there at the end of last year.

The team found strong support for the decision by a meeting of autoworkers in Detroit on December 9 to form rank-and-file factory committees to fight against plant closures, layoffs and other attacks on the working class.

"Keep your head up and push hard," David, a life-long Elizabeth resident and worker, said in a message of solidarity. "Stop the closures!"

The Detroit meeting, organised by the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* and the Socialist Equality Party, was called in response to an announcement by General Motors that it will close five plants in the US and Canada and eliminate at least 15,000 jobs, as part of an ongoing global restructuring at the expense of workers around the world.

Over the past two years, Australia's entire car making industry has been shut down, eliminating an estimated 150,000 jobs altogether, counting the flow-on effects in related industries. The shut-down of General Motors, Ford and Toyota plants in Adelaide and Melbourne in 2016 and 2017 followed the earlier closures of Mitsubishi, Nissan and Leyland.

What has happened in Elizabeth provides a picture of what such closures by the corporate giants mean for the lives of thousands of workers and their families, as well as for the many thousands more in related industries and for young workers unable to find decent secure employment as a result.

More than 92,000 people live in Elizabeth and its surrounds, mainly in public housing estates. The extensive General Motors Holden (GMH) car assembly complex

employed 4,500 workers in 2003.

It now largely stands as an empty shell, despite the company's sale of the site to developer Pelligra Group, which re-named it "Lionsgate Business Park" in the hope of turning it into an industrial park. "For lease" signs currently sit alongside old GMH logos.

Already blighted by decades of job and service cuts, Elizabeth now has staggering levels of unemployment, up to six times the national average. According to the federal Labour Department's small areas data, the jobless rate in Elizabeth stood at 30.9 percent in June this year, up from 26.8 percent in December 2010. In Elizabeth North, the figure was 22.7 percent, up from 21.9 percent. In Elizabeth East it was 13.2 percent, up from 11.9 percent.

For young workers, aged from 15 to 24, the situation is even worse. According to the social atlas produced by the City of Playford, which covers Elizabeth and its outlying areas, youth unemployment is nearly 60 percent in some parts of Elizabeth.

Almost one in four residents of Elizabeth relies on some form of social security payment, the rates of which have been kept below the poverty line for decades in order to coerce unemployed workers into low-paid employment on the most oppressive conditions.

Corey, a 25-year-old casual gutter cleaner and restoration worker from nearby Gawler, said the closures of auto factories meant "less jobs for more people, whether it's here or North America."

He said: "Don't go down without a fight, or don't go down at all! Take a stand. No one likes the governments and there's more of us than them!"

Corey explained: "It's pretty hard for people around here who have no qualifications. People are barely scraping things to make ends meet. I know personally you can't live on Newstart, and it doesn't make it any easier

when companies keep shutting down factories.

“People are being forced to do anything to scrape by. I had three full-time jobs, but none of them were permanent.

“They can finish you up anytime, even after six months. I was working for a labour-hire company, raising money for a charity. I showed up one day, and they just said they had no more work for me. It’s shocking, isn’t it?”

Hadyn, who is 24 and has been unemployed for two years, commented: “The closure of the [GMH] plant shocked South Australia because of the loss of jobs and the struggle to find jobs.

“I knew people who worked there. They are struggling to find work and struggling with their pay and conditions... It would be better if we could all get together and band together to fight these closures. I used to have full-time work, but now I’m looking for casual work to get back on my feet.”

Hadyn also had a message for the North American autoworkers. “I definitely agree with fighting against the closures,” he said. “Definitely they should take the fight into their own hands.”

Hadyn denounced the Labor Party’s refusal to increase the Newstart and Youth Allowance rates. “It’s foul that Labor would not increase the rate. Youth are struggling now. You can’t survive on Newstart. As soon as I get my payment, I’m broke. I suffer for the rest of the fortnight.”

David, who is undertaking a logistics course after years of casual work, used to be employed in nearby Edinburgh Park making electrical wiring systems for GMH, but lost that job when the company cut two shifts at the plant about four years ago.

“A lot of my friends used to work at GMH, and my sister-in-law’s dad was there for 19 years. My great-great grandad worked at the GMH’s other Adelaide plant at Woodville [which closed in the 1980s]. He would be turning over in his grave now.

“The closure was a kick in the guts . There is less pay now for different jobs. I went from making electrical systems to working in a dustbowl at a fertiliser company, and from \$28.50 an hour to \$23.50. I can’t even get a job now, even though I have qualifications, so I am studying logistics.”

Asked about the role of the trade unions, David said: “The unions helped the company shut down the plant. They kept saying everything would be all right, but it wasn’t. Half the people who worked there ended up moving interstate.”

David said hundreds of jobs had also gone at companies

that once supplied GMH, including Futuris auto seats, XY Batteries and Tenneco mufflers. “Edinburgh Park, where I worked, used to be a hive of activity. Now it’s a ghost town . And it’s all casual work now, or labour hire. The companies can call you any time of the day or night, no matter what you have organised with your family or kids.”

David said the Australian Labor Party’s national conference decision, made in Adelaide this week, to refuse to make an immediate increase in the Newstart unemployment benefit was “disgusting.”

“You can’t live on Newstart. I get \$557 a fortnight. You can’t survive on that; no way, after you pay for power, and to travel to job interviews .

“The government wants to make sure we will never get a rise on the dole, so we have no choice but to go and get something else to live on. Labor’s promise of a ‘review’ is just talk.”

Aubury, a 35-year-old make-up artist, said the GMH closure was “a big tragedy to a lot of workers that are now unemployed and looking for work, especially to those who have been there for a long time.”

Asked what she thought of the decision by the Detroit autoworkers, she said: “I definitely support them. If they all stick together and unite and stand up they can make a difference. If they organise internationally they’ll be able to have a greater voice.”

The authors also recommend:

A significant step forward: Detroit meeting of autoworkers resolves to form rank-and-file committees [13 December 2018]

Elizabeth, South Australia: A city devastated by General Motors Holden [27 December 2013]



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