

Factory fire symptomatic of social devastation in Calwell electorate

Peter Byrne: SEP candidate for Calwell
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Peter Byrne, the SEP candidate for Calwell, delivered the following speech to an SEP public meeting held in Melbourne on Sunday.

The electorate of Calwell is a sharp expression of the attacks on the working class that have been underway for decades.

At the outset, I want to take you back to what Broadmeadows was like in the decades of the 1960s and 1970s.

Some of Australia's major industries were located here. Ford, South Pacific Tyres, Autoliv, Nabisco, Yakka, Berlei, Ericsson, to name a few. They are now all closed.

The Ford Motor Company began production in this electorate in 1959 and closed in October 2016. At its peak, it employed around 6,000 workers.

To give some understanding of the conditions that existed in the working class: there was a nine-week strike at Ford in 1973, over pay and conditions. After four weeks, the metal workers union, led by Stalinist Laurie Carmichael, tried to shut down the strike before workers had achieved all their demands.

When the Ford workers met at the Broadmeadows Town Hall, and when the union announced a sell-out they tore off Carmichael's coat. After another five weeks on strike, the workers achieved victory.

Older workers explained to us that if you were unhappy with the pay or conditions in one factory, then you could literally quit, walk down the road to the next factory, and get another job immediately.

Workers were organised in unions and they achieved real wage gains and better conditions through their struggles.

But beginning with the Hawke-Keating Labor government of 1983, and the Prices and Incomes Accord, which was negotiated between the government, the employers and the unions, all that changed.

The globalisation of production, made possible through

developments in communications technology and plunging transportation costs, meant that transnational corporations could now shift production easily to the lowest wage countries.

This was also the period when the Chinese Stalinists of the so-called Communist Party government, were opening up the Chinese economy for capitalist investment.

The next three decades saw thousands of jobs destroyed, as whole industries were wiped out. Workplace factory committees were dismantled, and the wages and conditions of workers were wound back.

The dual processes of enterprise bargaining and award restructuring, initiated by the Stalinist trade union leaders, were implemented to make Australian industry evermore internationally competitive.

What has happened in Broadmeadows is a microcosm of an international process.

Last month there was yet another toxic chemical fire in this electorate at the Bradbury chemical waste processing factory.

Like previous fires at SKM, the recycling plant in Coolaroo, schools had to be closed and children sent home for fear of being poisoned by the toxic smoke.

Interviews with workers at the Bradbury plant revealed the working conditions that are now symptomatic of what workers face everywhere. They stand in sharp contrast to the previous period.

Before the fire, Bradbury employed about 50 workers, many of them Tamil refugees.

One of those workers, Vignesh Varatharaja, was badly burned in the fire when a drum containing solvents, near where he was working, exploded.

Another worker described the "normal" conditions in the factory before the fire:

"I had burns all over my body due to handling some chemicals. They did not tell me what chemicals they were... If I told them that I got burns from the chemicals,

they would say, ‘That’s how it is, it’ll just be like that for a short period of time,’ and then they would just apply some cream.”

The so-called Environment Protection Authority occasionally inspected the site, but workers explained the company always received plenty of warning.

A worker explained, “If [the] EPA was coming, on that particular day, all safety goggles must be worn, and a mask must be worn. Protective outfits would also be provided. Everything had to be worn only on the day [the] EPA comes.”

Workers were fearful of losing their jobs. One said, “You can’t complain like that there. If you tell them, they would say that they would fire you from work. They would scare us by saying that they would fire us from work if we talk too much...”

These Bradbury workers were union members of the Australian Workers Union, which was previously led by current Labor leader, Bill Shorten.

The problem of chemical waste is, literally, an explosive issue. The Bradbury warehouse held 400,000 litres of waste when it was only licensed to hold 150,000.

Where factories once employed workers who actually made things, they are now rented and filled with toxic waste, then abandoned. Moreover, such is the contempt towards the health and safety of the workers and residents here, that neither the government nor its regulatory bodies have done anything to make this warehouse safe, despite revoking its license just a few weeks before the explosion.

The indices of social distress in the area give a sense of what is like to live here today.

The official unemployment rate in Broadmeadows is 25 percent, that is 1 in 4 workers have no job. This is the highest rate in the state of Victoria, where the overall average unemployment stands at 6.1 percent. And the unemployment rate is rising. Now at 25 percent, it has risen from 22 percent in 2016.

In the suburb of Craigieburn, the number of workers on the dole rose faster than in any other part of the state, increasing in the five years between 2012 and 2017 from 2,064 to 4,000. This rise in unemployment coincides with household stress, defined as the need to spend more than 30 percent of weekly household income on rent.

Throughout Broadmeadows, families of four on the minimum wage are spending an average of 36 percent of their income on rent. Singles living alone are spending between 45 and 78 percent of their incomes on median rent. For singles under 21 living on Newstart, in a two-bedroom flat, as much as 51 percent of their income is

being spent on median rent.

In Craigieburn in 2016, 11 percent of households with a mortgage were making high loan repayments of \$2,600 or more per month. The suburb now has the third highest rate of people declaring bankruptcy in Australia.

Land speculation has led to a massive growth in areas like Craigieburn, without adequate government funding for roads, hospitals and schools. ABS [Australian Bureau of Statistics] data shows Craigieburn West’s population has increased by a staggering 6,400 percent over the past decade, from 228 people to 14,905 people.

There is simply no local solution to the issues facing workers here. The social crisis they confront is common to workers all over the world.

What is the SEP’s response to this desperate situation?

We stand for social equality! As the SEP candidate in this part of Melbourne, I urge every worker here, along with workers, students and youth in every electorate, city and state across Australia, to study our election statement and the socialist program that we are advancing for the working class.

I encourage you to vote for the SEP in Broadmeadows and for the SEP’s candidates in the Senate—Tessa Pietsch and Jason Wardle. Most importantly I urge you to make the vital decision to join the Socialist Equality Party, the Australian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International and participate in the struggle for socialism.

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