

Australian workers and youth back striking US autoworkers

Our reporters
19 September 2019

Over the past week, Socialist Equality Party (SEP) members and supporters have campaigned in key working-class suburbs in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and the regional New South Wales city of Newcastle, to build support for US autoworkers as they launch a major struggle against the “big three” auto companies.

SEP campaigners encountered widespread sympathy for the autoworkers, and a growing recognition that workers confront the same issues internationally, including poverty-level wages and an unending assault on conditions. Below are interviews with Australian workers prior to the launching of strike action by 46,000 US GM workers on Sunday night.

Julian, a former metal worker in Melbourne, had followed the revelations of endemic corruption within the United Auto Workers (UAW) union, which functions as a police force for the major auto companies. He commented: “Ours are bad enough but the American unions take corruption to another level, the UAW in particular.

“They are completely divorced from the working class and they seem to be tied in with the Democrats and the employers. It astounds me how corrupt they are, how much money they have and how contemptuous of workers they are. It makes the Socialist Equality Party’s position stand out rather well.

“Friends say to me, ‘how can you bag the unions?’ I say, when you realise what they’re doing, that’s absolutely every reason we should be bagging them because they’re corrupt and anti-working class to the core.

“In Australia, we don’t have a car industry. They sold it out completely. I see Trump saying he wants auto manufacturers to come back to America, but he can only do that because wage rates have been lowered

so drastically.

“Here, the unions did nothing to maintain the car industry. The only fight they put up was for redundancy, because they knew the capitalist class would be quite happy to pay the redundancy. They just wanted to shut it and take it overseas. Any union worth its salt should have been occupying the joint.

“It’s been done in the past. The metal workers did it in a tyre factory and a glass factory. But the unions refused to do it in the car industry. That’s one place they should have done it. Defend the industry, defend working-class jobs. I know for a fact that workers who were laid off when GM shut in Adelaide never picked up a job again. They’ll probably never work again and if they do it will be pushing shopping trolleys.

“The Labor Party is criminal too. What they wanted was more subsidies for the companies. There’s no socialisation in their policy. It’s more subsidies for big business. They wouldn’t dream of nationalising it. We can give them billions of dollars but we can’t nationalise it. And that’s why I don’t support them. I support your mob.”

Evan, a motorcycle mechanic in Melbourne, said: “The UAW are obviously not for the workers. They’ve split the autoworkers from the janitors, even though they’re under the same union. They’re trying to shut down the strikes.

“I was surprised to read about the corruption of the UAW, not that I was totally unaware. Over the years, these unions all seem to have been slowly infested with corruption. These organisations started as being for workers, but now they are an extended arm of the companies. I’m disgusted. They’re just taking bribes and greasing people’s palms.”

Evan spoke about massive job destruction in the auto industry, commenting: “They are obviously trying to

impose huge shutdowns and massive job cuts. I've read that tens of thousands of workers have already lost their jobs in the US, on top of hundreds of thousands more in China and India.

"Everything seems to be short-term and nothing long-term. It's just blatantly corporations getting whatever they can, and that includes GM and the UAW."

Muhammed, who works as a casual at a Melbourne plant that converts imported GM Colorados from left hand to right hand drive stated: "We don't have much automotive industry in Australia. There are a few truck making companies, but this is the only one making cars at the moment.

"They shut down the manufacturing in Australia creating big unemployment. It's not good for the people. When people get jobs in these industries they feel a sense of security. They buy houses with mortgages.

"I would say to the American car workers, think wise before you choose your leaders because they are the ones who make these kind of changes and regulations. Regardless of which country you live in, politicians make promises but when they come into power they don't really care about the people."

Hussan, a pharmaceutical employee in Sydney, drew parallels between the situation facing workers in the US and Australia, commenting: "Ten years ago, pharmacy workers were a lot better paid than they are now. The reason for that is large corporations came in and bought up everything for cheaper than anyone can afford to sell. That leads to wages being reduced to the minimum.

"The head of the company gets all the money now. It's not fair. One person gets 90 percent of the money and the rest of us are all struggling! We end up working twice as hard because they work us to our maximum efficiency. They have teams figuring out how to make you work harder."

Asked about the need for workers to unite internationally, Hussan responded: "This reminds me of the famous painting with millions of people crouched over holding up a table for seven fat people who are eating. Can you imagine if everyone who was poor or struggling went on strike? The whole world would come to a halt!"

Bertram, a warehouse worker, said that his \$24 an hour wage was not even to cover bills and debt

repayments. "It just gets worse," he said, noting that his wages had remained stagnant over the course of five years, despite a rapidly rising cost of living.

"There has been a small wage increase of one or two dollars but not compared to the cost of living, they don't match up," he stated. Bertram said he had some discussions with a union representative in the last six months about his pay but stated: "Nothing's come of it, it seems completely ineffective."

When asked what he thought of the UAW corruption scandal, Bertram declared that it was "disgusting and a betrayal of the people they are supposed to be supporting, people who are paying them. The union certainly doesn't represent the working class. They represent themselves."

When asked about the issues facing workers in Australia and the US, Bertram said, "I think there's a common stream connecting workers all over the world. This is something we are all fighting for. I really hope they achieve their goals."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact