

# Australia: Yarram workers and residents oppose sawmill closure

Our reporters

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Following the November 18 closure of the Associated Kiln Driers (AKD) sawmill in Yarram, Victoria, *World Socialist Web Site* reporters travelled to the small town in the state's Gippsland region. Former AKD workers and local residents told the WSWS they were shocked and outraged by the sudden closure, about which the 73 sacked workers had been giving no warning at all.

**Natalie**, who has lived in Yarram for 14 years, said: "The workers knew nothing about it. We've heard that it's not 'sustainable,' but it's not sustainable for the town [if the sawmill is closed].

"It's not just the 73 people on the ground, it's the truckies, diesel mechanics, the other shops in town. People won't be spending money if there's no money to spend. And it's right on Christmas.

"[The company] say they might try and help them go to other sites but that means leaving town. Fancy driving to Colac [270 kilometres away] every morning!"

Natalie said alternative employment in the region for timber workers was limited: "There's still Radial Timber but they only do hardwood. AKD did softwood. There's another sawmill at Heyfield. They almost shut down permanently a few years back."

She explained that life in Yarram was already becoming more and more difficult. "We lost our last bank in September. When we first moved in we had the big four and Bendigo [banks]. They even took the ATM. When we lose power, which is often in this area, you can't pay for your prescriptions, you can't get fuel, you can't pay for groceries. We're getting blow after blow.

"Housing in Yarram is so expensive for what's here, where there's no work."

Natalie's husband commutes 50 minutes each way to work out of town. Asked about the unions, he explained

that he had been sold out by the Transport Workers Union as a truck driver in Melbourne and had to move to the country as they couldn't afford their mortgage in Melbourne.

**Sue** was born in Yarram, but only moved back four years ago, after retiring from her work as a nurse in Darwin and Alice Springs. She said: "I work as a volunteer with someone who has lost her position at AKD and another whose partner has lost his position. Apart from all those jobs, the flow on will be the money that they spend in town, their children attending schools, all those sorts of things will be affected.

"Those people have been devastated by the way it was done. They just arrived for work. And it's so soon after the closing of the one and only bank. The whole thing comes down to money for the big companies."

**Rochelle** said her neighbour lost her job and that "they weren't treated very well. It was a surprise to everyone, I think, including the town. It's going to affect a lot of families, and the timing is really bad.

"They were still employing [new] people and still sending people off for training—like really recently. As far as I know, they were making money.

"They'd been planning it for sure. And if anyone knew, they were really holding it close to their chest, because everyone was in the dark.

"I would hold the company and probably the government accountable. But they're all accountable in some way and I think overall, business needs to step away from the greed and the power trip they're on. More often than not, employers put money before people."

**Stephen** said, "I worked there when they first put the sawmill here. They paid the people working there f-all. The wages are [still] not good for their conditions. I'd work there on and off when I needed to. It was nearly

all casual back then.

“When they first set the mill up, there were ambulances out there every second day because they employed young farmers’ kids and they hadn’t got the experience. They didn’t have guards and covers [on the machinery]. If you don’t know what you’re doing, you’ve just got to step on the wrong side and the chain will take your legs off.

“One guy got his arm caught in the long conveyor going to the chipper. He was straight out of school.”

**Thomas** moved to Yarram four months ago from Bacchus Marsh. He is doing a course in civil construction and working part-time at the local supermarket. He said, “I have empathy with the sawmill employees. A lot of them have been there pretty much their whole working careers. It’s only six or seven weeks until Christmas. Work isn’t exactly in abundance, speaking from experience myself, I found it quite difficult to land work.”

**Janine**, a retired nurse, has lived in Yarram all her life. She said: “This is a small community and we’re in the middle of nowhere and we’re on the way to nowhere. There are four big industries in town: the hospital, Mirridong, and Woolworths, and now the sawmill is gone.

“Young people go to school here, they go away to get a qualification, but they never come back. There’s no industry so there’s no reason to come back.

“The whole world is in a mess. My brother lives in England and my cousins live in Canada and they’re all saying similar things: People can’t afford houses, they haven’t got jobs.”



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