

Australia: Kimberly-Clark to shut Ingleburn plant and axe over 200 jobs.

By Terry Cook
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In a shock announcement early this month, consumer products giant Kimberly-Clark said it will close its Ingleburn plant by the end of July and move production to its plants in Asia. The south-west Sydney facility, which manufactures Huggies nappies and employs around 220 people, has been in operation since 1988. A new \$28 million production line was added in 2013.

Kimberly-Clark is a US-owned corporation with plants in 35 countries including in Australia, New Zealand, the US, Mexico, Thailand, Taiwan, Brazil, Korea and South Africa.

The company has said that its Ingleburn site will be sold off and the plant's machinery stripped out and relocated to other Kimberly-Clark production facilities, thereby ruling out any possibility of a future recommissioning.

Distraught workers outside the Ingleburn plant explained to the media that they had not been given any forewarning or provided any kind of consultation. They were simply summoned to a meeting with management and told that the factory was closing and there was no chance of any reprieve. Some employees have more than 40 years of service with the company.

"There are people here who have just bought brand new houses and cars who don't know what they are going to do," one worker explained. Another said the loss of jobs will now make it hard for workers to put food on the table.

A hypocritical media statement by Kimberly-Clark Australia's managing director Doug Cunningham declared: "At this time the company is focused on the wellbeing of employees and their families and providing them with the support they need now and in the months ahead."

While the company claims it will continue to operate its plant in Millicent, South Australia, which

manufactures Kleenex, VIVA and Kimberly-Clark Professional Products, there is no guarantee that it will not be axed as well.

The Ingleburn closure is part the company's aggressive *Global Restructuring Program* initiated last year to drastically slash costs. Under this plan, the company will close 10 plants and eliminate 5,500 jobs—13 percent of its entire global workforce—to generate annual pre-tax cost savings of up to \$550 million by the end of 2020.

The company, working hand-in-glove with the unions, is using the threat of future closures to impose cost-cutting and extract additional multi-million dollar government handouts and concessions in host countries.

Last December the company withdrew its plans to close its plant at Fox Crossing, Wisconsin, which employs around 400 people, in return for \$25 million in government tax incentives. While the Fox Crossing plant was given a reprieve, the company will shutter its facility in Conway, Arkansas by 2021 at the cost of 350 jobs.

In Australia, the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) has made clear it has no intention of mobilising its members to stop the closure of the Ingleburn plant or defending any of the jobs.

The union called on Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who heads the pro-business federal Coalition government, to meet with the company and persuade it to change its decision.

Commenting on closure, Morrison contemptuously declared that Ingleburn workers "should have confidence opportunities will be there into the future." He added: "What we see is that people are able to weather the disappointment and the impact I know that this can have on individuals when there are changes in

these businesses.”

Far from the conditions existing to “weather the disappointment”—i.e., find alternate full-time work—the Ingleburn closure is occurring against a wave of job cuts across many sectors, including telecommunications, manufacturing and construction to retail and banking.

According to figures released last month by the Roy Morgan group, 18.2 percent of the workforce, or around 2.5 million people, are either jobless or under-employed. In Ingleburn alone, even on the highly understated official figures, unemployment stands at around 7.5 percent or close to twice the national rate of 4.9 percent.

The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) has attempted to use the closure to drag workers behind its “Change the Rules” campaign, which is aimed at the election of yet another pro-market Labor government in the May 18 federal elections. ACTU secretary Sally McManus declared that “working people deserve a leader who is in their corner.”

The record shows that neither Labor, nor its leader Bill Shorten, is in the workers’ corner. In fact, it was Hawke and Keating Labor governments from 1983 to 1996 and their Accord agreements with the unions that created the conditions for sweeping attacks on jobs, and the destruction of hard-won wages and working conditions.

These assaults were followed by a massive expansion of labour hire and work casualisation under federal Labor governments from 2007 to 2013 that also introduced the draconian Fair Work industrial laws and anti-strike provisions, with the full support of the unions.

These “rules,” which the ACTU now fraudulently claims to oppose, have been used by Labor and Liberal-National governments alike to straightjacket workers and block any fight against the employers’ onslaught.

Far from defending workers’ interests, Shorten, when in the leadership of the Australian Workers Union (AWU), oversaw secret work agreements that stripped his union members of conditions and penalty rates, including low paid workers at Cleanevent in 1998.

Along with promoting illusions in Labor, or that even Morrison could be persuaded to act in workers’

interests, the CFMEU continues to whip up nationalism. The CFMEU’s NSW manufacturing divisional secretary Michael Aird declared that the federal and NSW Liberal state governments should “stand up for Australian jobs” and called for trade protection measures including the introduction of import tariffs.

These appeals, which ultimately blame workers in cheap labour countries for the loss of jobs, are reactionary and aimed at preventing the development of a unified international campaign by Kimberly-Clark workers in defence of jobs.

A fight to defend jobs requires a decisive break with the unions, which function as an industrial police force for the employers. Workers should establish an independent rank-and-file committee to reject the plant closure and occupy the facility to prevent the company from moving out machinery.

Such an occupation would need to turn to workers in Australia and across Kimberly-Clark operations nationally and internationally who face similar attacks on their jobs and working conditions.

Above all, the struggle must be guided by an international socialist perspective that rejects the dictates of the financial and corporate elite and fights for the establishment of a workers’ government that will reorganise society and production to meet needs of the majority and not the profits of a wealthy few.

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