

Australia: Surveys reveal majority of former car workers unable to find decent jobs

By Terry Cook
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On October 20, 2017 all car production in Australia ended when General Motors-Holden closed its plant in Elizabeth, South Australia. The closure marked the end of 70 years of vehicle production in the country and destroyed the remaining 450 jobs in an industry that had once employed tens of thousands.

Just two weeks before the Elizabeth shut-down, Toyota closed its only remaining Australian production plant, located in the Melbourne suburb of Altona. A year earlier, Ford had wrapped up its remaining Australian production after a protracted period of downsizing and mass job shedding.

The ending of vehicle production was estimated to have cost a combined 50,000 jobs directly and across associated industries such as auto parts manufacturers.

The corporatised trade unions, working hand in glove with the companies and state and federal governments, Labor and Liberal alike, did everything they could to suppress widespread opposition to this destruction. Having played the major role in enforcing the gutting of jobs in the industry over the course of decades, the unions then peddled claims that “retraining” would mitigate the effects of the mass sackings.

These claims stand exposed as a fraud. Former centres of car production, such as Elizabeth in Adelaide and Broadmeadows in Melbourne, have been left mired in social crisis. Official unemployment rates are as high as 20 percent, while an entire generation of working class youth faces a future of joblessness and social misery.

Two surveys released last month reveal that the vast majority of former car workers, many of whom were employed in the industry for decades, have been unable to find alternative full-time employment, with decent wages and conditions. Instead they have been thrown into unemployment, or forced to take on precarious,

low-paid casual and contract work.

The plight of the car-workers is the end product of a decades-long operation spearheaded by Labor and the unions. This began in the 1980s when the Australian Council of Trade Unions, and all of its affiliates, collaborated with the Hawke and Keating Labor governments to enforce “orderly closures,” across the car, steel and mining industries, and virtually every other sector of manufacturing.

This policy was the logical conclusion of the nationalist and pro-capitalist program of Labor and the unions. Under conditions of the globalisation of production, they dispensed with their earlier calls for limited reforms, and became the most ardent proponents of ensuring the “international competitiveness” of their “own” national industry through a continuous offensive against jobs, wages and conditions.

The unions enforced the closure of the industry, which was spearheaded by the federal Labor government of Julia Gillard. They championed calls for multi-million dollar subsidies to the car companies, on the pretext that this would save jobs, the same time as these major corporations were engaged in relentless downsizing. On the basis of such appeals, more than \$12 billion in direct government subsidies and protections were handed over to the car industry giants over the 20 years to 2013.

The unions also peddled the lie that jobs could be saved if workers agreed to endless company demands for concessions including wage freezes, lower manning levels, speedups and the surrender of rafts of working conditions. Rather than preventing the closures, the consequence of this program was that the corporations made a profit bonanza, as they, along with unions, were preparing for the final liquidation of the entire industry.

At GM Holden, Toyota and Ford, the companies and unions initiated government-funded “retraining” schemes and job search assistance, as has been done in other industries where mass downsizing occurred. This was used as a means of hosing down the opposition of workers.

These schemes dovetailed with government funded programs that would supposedly generate a boom in other sectors of manufacturing and create thousands of jobs, as car production was wound down.

In 2013, the South Australian Labor government appointed former federal Labor minister and union chief Greg Combet to oversee this supposed “transition.” He received a \$160,000 annual salary.

The November results of a survey of 950 former Holden workers on their employment situation after the closure of the Elizabeth plant demonstrates that these programs were sham. They were a boondoggle that enriched the corrupt union bureaucracy, while obscuring the social disaster caused by the car industry shutdown.

The survey showed that while 76.4 percent of the workers had found jobs, two thirds of these were in precarious lower paying part-time and casual employment. The remaining 23 percent are still without a job of any kind. They have little chance of ever finding one.

Another survey by consultants Acil Allen of displaced automotive workers from Ford, Holden and Toyota, conducted 12 months after the closures, found that of those interviewed, only 59 percent were in full-time work. Some 34 percent were employed as casuals. Another 5 percent were self-employed. Amid a rapid economic slowdown, such forms of work are highly precarious.

Similar joint operations by the car conglomerates, governments and the auto unions will be used internationally to try to head-off the emergence of a unified industrial and political movement by auto workers to the current round of job cuts.

In November, Daimler Mercedes-Benz announced it will slash more than 10,000 jobs over the next two years. German carmaker Audi, a subsidiary of Volkswagen, is set to eliminate 9,500 jobs over five years. Bosch is seeking to slash another 500 jobs at its facility in the city of Reutlingen. General Motors is closing four plants in the US and Canada and

eliminating 8,000 jobs.

Under these conditions the car companies are relying on the unions, such as the United Auto Workers in the US and IG Metall in Germany, to contain and derail the growing resistance among auto workers internationally to an ongoing corporate assault on their conditions.

The lesson of the Australian car industry closure is that workers can only defend their jobs and their livelihoods through a rebellion against the unions. New organisations of struggle are required, including independent rank-and-file committees, to mobilise the immense social and political power of auto workers on a global scale.

Such committees would be tasked with turning out to other sections of the working class facing a similar offensive on their jobs and conditions and organising a genuine industrial and political counter-offensive. They would immediately confront major political issues, including the burning necessity to transform the car companies, and other major industries, into publicly-owned utilities, democratically controlled by the working class.

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