

AMWU

News

Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union



AMWU

Winter 2021

Keep renewables jobs in Australia

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Made on May Day**

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Editorial

Most of us have someone in our workplace who we can point to and say, “they really showed me the ropes”. Often as union members, it’s someone who demonstrated what it means to stand together, or that we have a right to demand a safe and respectful workplace.

They usually know the workplace inside-out. Through their stories and advice, they pass along hard-learned lessons about what it means to be union, and what it means to be AMWU.

During my time as a tradesperson and then as a union official, I’ve been lucky enough to meet many of these members.

The other day, I caught up with Pat Johnson, who was one of those wise and supportive AMWU members for me.

Pat and I never worked together on the tools (we were in different workplaces), but when I became a union official, he had been an AMWU organiser for a few years already.

Of course, I wasn’t the only young person who benefitted from Pat’s support, there are many AMWU organisers and delegates who credit Pat with an important lesson or two.

During our catch up, Pat told me about an interaction he’d had at his local coffee shop with a young worker.

Pat had never met this worker before, but saw he worked at an AMWU workplace, and got to talking. The worker shared some concerns about his hours, pay and conditions.

When Pat asked him what advice he’d gotten from his union delegate, the guy responded that he wasn’t a member and didn’t know how to go about joining.

With that, Pat opened his phone, called an organiser, and arranged a visit to his workplace.

Pat’s story stuck with me because it renewed my admiration for him. Even though he is no longer a delegate or organiser; he’s been retired for over a decade, Pat still talks union wherever he goes.

The truth is, helping a worker to join their union is one of the most rewarding and generous things we can do and I understand why Pat never gave it up.

Unions have never grown stronger through clever ads or marketing tactics, it’s always been thanks to conversations between working class people.

Right now, these conversations are more important than ever, especially for the next generation of workers.

Union membership amongst young people is at historic lows and if we don’t turn it around, we can be certain the next generations will be worse off.

Research shows that young people who have conversations with their parents about being in a union are more likely to sign up when they enter the workforce.

We can’t assume that young workers know who we are, or what our forebears achieved for them.

I encourage all AMWU members to take some time with the young people in their life to talk about why it pays to be union.

We all have a role to play in bringing the next generation into the union movement, and we should start that work at the dinner table or over the BBQ.

Steve Murphy,
AMWU National Secretary



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AMWU News Winter 2021

The AMWU News is authorised by the National Secretary of the AMWU, Steve Murphy.

Keep renewables jobs in Australia

Union members at Victorian wind tower manufacturer, Keppel Prince, have taken their fight for secure jobs in renewable energy from their factory floor in Portland, all the way to the corridors of power in Canberra.



Workers from Keppel Prince traveled from Portland to fight to save over 100 jobs on the line outside Vestas in Melbourne.

Earlier this year, Keppel Prince was forced to make forty workers redundant when the contracts to build the towers for two nearby wind-farm projects, supplying power to a Federal Government project, were given to overseas companies.

The Morrison Government signed a deal to purchase 75 percent of the energy generated by the Port Fairy wind farm for the next 15 years to power Snowy Hydro 2.0, but they refused to mandate any local content as part of the deal, locking out manufacturing workers at Keppel Prince.

AMWU member Dean Wombwell says "it's been massively stressful. Being a young bloke who has just bought a house and wanting to start a family, the uncertain times have put a real hold on things."

"It's affected a lot of people - some of whom have already started a family - and the ripple effect from having to put off those 40 blokes is massive. Some are still looking for work or are unemployed."

The forty redundancies could be just the beginning - over a hundred more jobs

are still under threat. AMWU delegate Jamie Wombwell and his fellow worker Dean weren't about to let the jobs that support their community disappear without a fight, so they did what AMWU members do best - they got organised.

The Keppel Prince workers, made up of a mix of AMWU and AWU members, have rallied in Portland and Melbourne, as well as going up to Canberra to campaign for their jobs.

Jamie says that the lack of mandated local content "left it open for the wind tower companies - Vestas, GE, Siemens, Messers - to have no local content. Now it all can come in from overseas."

"That means it's obviously cheaper, but the quality is not near the standards we produce. Our towers far exceed the Australian standards."

He also says the extra cost involved in ensuring the towers were made locally would amount to just 2 per cent of the overall cost of the project, or 0.5 per cent more per kilowatt hour, and would secure demand for Australian steel and jobs.

Supported by AMWU National Secretary Steve Murphy and their local organiser Tony Hynds, Jamie and Dean went up to Canberra to speak directly to Trade, Tourism and Investment Minister Dan Tehan, Industry, Science and Technology Minister Karen Andrews, and Energy and Emission Reduction Minister Angus Taylor to put the case for a change to government procurement rules.

Jamie says all he and his fellow workers are asking is that a percentage of these projects be made with local steel and built by local workers.

"When we were in Canberra, Angus Taylor promised to talk to the NSW and ACT governments to try to make sure they mandated local content."

"But we are asking that instead of leaving it to be implemented state by state, can't the Morrison Government mandate that any contracts like this be 20 or 30 per cent local content?"

"This would create hundreds if not thousands of jobs."

Jamie and Dean also pointed out the cruel irony of massive wind-farm projects being built right next door to the Keppel Prince facility but using imported steel and products.

With the right government support, not only would jobs be created, Australia's main wind tower manufacturer would be able to expand to other parts of the country.

Shadow Minister for Industry and Innovation, Ed Husic, and Shadow Minister for Climate and Energy, Chris Bowen, have promised to support our push for local content.

The Morrison Government ministers reneged on their promise to broker meetings with Vestas and have ruled out intervening to save any of the jobs in renewables in Portland.

Dean says the Canberra trip was invaluable in building his campaigning skills and understanding how to push for change by talking to politicians and the media.

"We spoke to a lot of representatives there from Labor and the Liberal parties," he says.

"A lot of them were understanding and were confused as to why it (local procurement) was not happening, that legislation had not been brought in

Dean agrees that the success of the VRET shows what a difference government-mandated local content requirements make.

"When Victoria bought in the VRET our workforce tripled, we were working six or seven days a week and had to put on more people. It's proven that it works, so why wouldn't they bring that in Australia wide."

"It would provide good jobs and promote growth in the renewable energy sector in Australia."

Jamie and Dean say the current situation is pretty grim.

"Keppel Prince still has no big contracts," Jamie says. "We've been given a little bit of work to help us through. But we are just scraping through by the skin of our teeth."

"There is not a lot of work in the black-steel area (wind-tower metal fabrication) but our blasters and painters have a little bit of work to do.

Some workers, he says, have received a lifeline through nearby businesses.

Some work has come through at the Portland Alcoa smelter, which has kept about 25 Keppel Prince workers on the job.

"And there is the possibility of some beam work coming through but we are not 100% sure yet.

"The union's been terrific," he says. "They organised a spot rally in Melbourne that was fantastic and the follow up has been terrific."

Jamie says a ship carrying imported wind-farm components will arrive in Portland, and AMWU members will be there to greet it.

"The union has organised a community protest for that. It's coming into our local port, which is just an absolute slap in the face for all those workers who lost their jobs."

"These jobs could be saved with the stroke of a pen by the Morrison Government. But rather than supporting manufacturing jobs in emerging industries, the government has chosen to pay \$600 million to build a facility that will create just 10 ongoing jobs."



(L-R Tony Hynds, Dean and Jamie Wombwell and Steve Murphy in Canberra to fight to save jobs and wind tower manufacturer Keppel Prince.

to have a certain percentage made in Australia. They were dumbfounded."

Jamie says the company and its workers were thriving until a Victorian Government scheme - which had led the way on local procurement rules - ended earlier this year.

"Under the Victorian Renewable Energy Target (VRET) projects, they had to have 63 per cent local content," Jamie says.

"Victoria is the only state with local content rules. VRET 2 comes in in July, but we won't see a flow on until the first quarter next year."



"I just bought a house at the start of the year - it's pretty hard", Jamie says.

Dean was a leading hand boilermaker at Keppel Prince, guiding and training fellow workers in the wind-tower manufacturing business. He is one of the workers currently employed at the nearby Alcoa smelter.

Dean says with the loss of so many workers he has been helping Jamie with the union's campaign and plans to step up to help more by becoming a delegate, subject to a vote by his fellow workers.

Jamie says the AMWU and its organisers have done a great job supporting the workers and leading the campaign.



Jamie Wombwell outside Vestas in Melbourne.

AMWU National Secretary, Steve Murphy, says that the Keppel Prince situation shows that the Morrison Government doesn't care about manufacturing workers.

"These jobs could be saved with the stroke of a pen, but rather than supporting manufacturing jobs in emerging industries, the government has chosen to pay \$600 million to build a facility that will create just 10 ongoing jobs.

"It's time for the government to step up and support quality manufacturing jobs and those workers who live in our regional communities", Steve says. ●

Mayday for Aussie Made on May Day

Supporting Australian made products and jobs was a key theme of May Day marches around the country on May 1 as Australians once again came out to commemorate the industrial and social achievements of working families over the last century.

In Parramatta Park workers from across the union movement marched and chanted, in Melbourne they had enthusiastic bagpiping, and as always Queensland turned it on with a series of rallies across the state, as the country turned out to mark an important day in the calendar for working class people.

While 'support Aussie made' was an important theme, the many achievements of the union movement were talked about and remembered.

Annual leave, penalty rates, and superannuation, along with maternity leave, redundancy pay and sick leave.

Banners at May Day events supported everything from free public education, resisting racism, ending casualisation, to encouraging more Australian manufacturing.

Union members weren't able to march in Perth, as a result of lockdown restrictions, but they were there in spirit.

In 1889, May Day was chosen as the date for International Workers' Day to commemorate the struggle for an eight-hour working day. This year, as always, we reflect on how far we've come and the fights we are gearing up to win in the future. ●

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Aussie made**



Queensland



Bendigo



Brisbane



Hobart



Ipswich



Queensland



SA



NSW



SA



Melbourne



Proof unions drive better deals

It was only when workers at different sites of car part distributor Bapcor were merged into one mega-site, they realised how good a deal workers at the union shops were getting.

Bapcor has been busily buying up other players in the automotive part sector including retail brands like Autobarn, Autopro, Midas and Burson Auto Parts to create a new auto part and accessory dealer conglomerate.

Workers at 12 sites from all over Melbourne will move to a new purpose-built warehouse in Tullamarine over the course of the next 12 months.

As part of this process, they will close down the warehouses which supply these different retail stores and bring them into one new complex.

But workers at Burson, whose 55 staff have been union for 15 years, are earning almost \$10 an hour more than their new colleagues, thanks to successive rounds of union negotiations.

They'll be working alongside workers from the recently bought out Automotive Brands, who signed their first union agreement back in 2018 and earn about \$2 an hour more than non-union workers from AAD.

The workers from AAD, which was also recently bought out by Bapcor, had their own self negotiated non-union agreement with many on close to minimum wage.

It's the AAD workers who are the big winners as workers from all three companies transfer to their massive new purpose-built warehouse at Tullamarine. These 160 workers are smiling as the AMWU has ensured Bapcor will transfer these former AAD workers to the Automotive Brands agreement.

"About 160 people are going to be on the former Automotive Brands agreement, which has become the Bapcor agreement, and so earn a couple of extra bucks an hour," says organiser Joe Cummaudo.

"They must be thanking their lucky stars they've just walked into a union agreement, because their business was bought by another business which had one. They better join the union is all I can say," laughs Joe. In fact, seven already have.

But even with the new deal, workers from Burson, formerly based in Preston, will still be earning a lot more than workers alongside them.

"The workers from Burson are going to be a daily reminder to other workers why you join a union and stick together, because you get a better outcome for years to come," says organiser Joe Cummaudo.

"They have much better redundancy provisions and also income insurance, but again, that's because they've been organised and stuck together over many years."

"When I recruited the blokes at Automotive Brands in 2018, I gave them Burson as an example of how good a union agreement can be."

And union membership is still bearing fruit for those workers.

Before Automotive Brands workers came over to Tullamarine, Joe negotiated a \$2000 bonus to make the move and a \$50 a week petrol allowance.

"Those members live in the eastern suburbs near the old site at Nunawading so driving to Tullamarine in the northern suburbs will add up to two and a half hours of travel a day," he says.

Elvis Brandellero, who worked for Automotive Brands and has just moved to the new Tullamarine warehouse, says it's going to be uncomfortable and disruptive working side by side with workers on a higher pay rate.

"With strong union representation and all the workers sticking together we should be able to bridge the gap between Burson and other workers on site," he says.

"I can see things improving for everyone. Elvis is still kicking himself he and other workers at Automotive Brands didn't move sooner to get a union agreement.

"We tried to get the union in in 2010 but not enough people were interested, only 20% joined, and it fizzled out," he says.

"The workers from Burson are going to be a daily reminder to other workers why you join a union and stick together, because you get a better outcome for years to come."

"But then there was a period of four years when there was no increase whatsoever in pay even though our productivity had gone through the roof, all we were getting was CPI increases.

"And the company was making good profits – increasing year on year and they weren't interested in offering anything – which is why we went to the union.

"It's clear without union representation conditions and wages will be less.

"You can't do it by yourself, the union knows how to make it legal, this is what they do.

"This really is a textbook example of why you join your union.

"We're 10 years behind the Burson people because we didn't get the union in sooner, it's plain and simple."

The union will be working to get everyone at the new mega-site signed up so the workers have a strong negotiating position to improve wages and conditions at the next set of EA negotiations. ●

Time to give back to the workers

Steelmaking in Australia has struggled in recent times, but now Bluescope is back in the black at its Port Kembla plant, it's time to put some of the profits into worker's pockets.

That's easier said than done, according to AMWU NSW southern region organiser Gavin Bubb, as he and about 60 workers continue drawn-out enterprise agreement negotiations with Bluescope contractor Ventia.

"We've had 13 meetings since November," Gavin says.

"So we are saying these guys should be worth a similar amount, perhaps 3.5 per cent across the three years."

Gavin says there has been slight change in his latest meeting, with the company lifting its offer slightly from 2.5/2.25/2.25 to 2.5 per cent a year across the board.

"That's not something I'd be prepared to endorse given the position from the members."

Even though the asks in our members' log of claims wouldn't have cost the company

anything because they simply involved changing clauses or making clarifications, they've said no to everything.

"It's now time to be a bit creative with the industrial campaign," says Gavin.

"Our intention is to start putting in some more protected actions, but to be a little more strategic about how we do them and how they play out around shutdown periods.

"In the past we have had a 24-hour overtime ban, then a four-hour stoppage, then we tried something a little different around safety.

"Our guys set up what's called red-and-yellow pathway work, basically doing isolations for other people who haven't worked around a department, and also setting up group boards for bigger jobs.

"We put bans on those which threw the work back on the Bluescope employees or management.

"It seems to do the trick to get them to move, so we are going to ramp up over the next four weeks."

Gavin says Bluescope put the brakes on spending in 2015 but that's not sustainable and it's time to change that.



Workers hold four-hour work stoppage in April after Ventia refuses to raise its pay offer.

"We wanted to have something nailed down by now, but most other companies are much easier to deal with than this one.

"Their management team is very arrogant. It's their way or the highway."

The AMWU put forward a log of claims including a wage rise of 4.2 per cent annually over three years; a 4.2 per cent a year allowance increase over the same period; a 0.5 per cent annual rise in superannuation; changes to sick leave; separate domestic violence leave; and reviews of redundancy, warning letters and bonus payment arrangements.

Gavin says only one item - for superannuation to be paid while on workers' compensation - was agreed, because it had already been adopted elsewhere on site. Everything else was knocked back.

"Bluescope workers recently received a pay rise of 4 per cent, 4 per cent and 3 per cent over three years," he says.

"My members basically work pretty much side-by-side, hand-in-hand with Bluescope employees. They supervise some Bluescope employees and some contractors within Bluescope.



Workers protesting that workers employed directly by BlueScope were earning more.

"We are trying to drum into people that wages at Bluescope have been stagnant since 2015 - when they closed or supposedly closed the steelworks and then forced all these contracting companies to come back in at 30 per cent less.



AMWU members supporting each other with food during four-hour stoppage.

"Bluescope has had an absolute hold on the purse strings since then.

"But Bluescope is making huge money - a \$1.08 billion forecast profit for 12 months.

"They have money already banked to pay for the relining of the blast furnace, in cash, something they've never had.

"So, we say it's time Bluescope should be opening the purse strings to the community." ●

Forgotten pandemic heroes

They are the forgotten heroes of the COVID pandemic, and Brisbane's Mater Hospital management wants it kept that way, but AMWU members are making plenty of noise taking a stand for their pay and conditions.

The Mater is a major private hospital with a 24-hour emergency department, intensive and coronary care, day surgery, day oncology and day respite, as well as medical, cancer and surgical units, and its maintenance staff provide a critical role in keeping them running.

But Mater management wants to thank these key workers with an enterprise agreement involving a two-year pay freeze and reduced conditions.

The hospital's callous approach has united about 50 maintenance workers from four unions, 11 AMWU members and the rest members of the ETU, CFMEU and the Plumbers Union. If they weren't organised these workers would continue to be left out and forgotten.



AMWU members at Mater Hospital show they won't stand for a two-year pay freeze.

"When it comes to healthcare during the pandemic everyone is quick to thank the doctors, nurses, ambos, cleaners and admin staff," AMWU Queensland and Northern Territory Secretary Rohan Webb says.

"But they tend to leave out the workers who do the critical maintenance in the hospitals. These are the people the public forgot to thank during the pandemic."



Workers gather outside Mater Hospital to fight for better pay and conditions.

Rohan says the main issue has been pay, with the Mater initially offering a pay freeze for the next two years and one per cent in the agreement's third year.

"They have come back after we lodged notices of industrial action with an annual increase of 1.8 per cent, 1.8 per cent and 2 per cent, which is still below what people doing the same work in a Queensland public hospital would get."

The members aren't happy and are also fighting for fairness and respect. Outside of pay the other main claim - which the Mater continues to reject - is one for more respect to be shown to workers, mainly with mutual agreement over rosters.

The Mater is demanding the ability to forcibly change workers' rosters.

"These are the people the public forgot to thank during the pandemic."

A lot of these people have family, but the hospital wants the ability to do things like change workers from day to night shift with no consultation, or any ability for the workers to say no.

As hospital staff, the union members recognise they have a responsibility to allow the hospital to keep running and keep people safe, so their approach involved limited work bans and stoppages.

"While they want to put pressure on their employer they know that a hospital can't stop," Rohan says. "So they are doing limited work stoppages and technology bans, such as doing the work but not entering it into the computer system that is meant to streamline and record it appropriately."

"And they have not yet been taking full-day stoppages; until now they have been doing one - two hour stoppages before the end of shift, the types of action you can take when working in a hospital."

Rohan says all the members are united and as a last resort were considering escalating their campaign. "But in the end it all comes down to respect."

The union will be backing these workers all the way.

Members at Mater have continued stoppages this winter - from one hour to full 24-hour stoppages that include paperwork and technology bans. ●

Gas workers fire up

A foreign company, pocketing billions of dollars flogging Australian gas off the remote WA coast, is trying to make its workers cop a three-year pay freeze.

Workers at Chevron's gigantic liquefied natural gas facility on Barrow Island, 50 kilometres off WA's Pilbara coast, have struck back with rolling industrial action.

The workers are contracted to UGL and run and maintain Chevron's \$2 billion dollar gas purification and liquefaction facility. The facility prepares and stores gas extracted from nearby drilling sites in the greater Gorgon gas fields for export.

The company also wants workers to pay travel costs to the site even though Barrow Island is only accessible by plane. These costs amount to \$600 per swing.

Workers have rejected the claims and instead voted by a whopping 99% majority to begin a campaign of protected industrial action.

200 AMWU members are standing shoulder to shoulder with workers from the ETU, CFMEU and AWU against the proposed pay cut by undertaking rolling 4-hour stoppages on both day and night shift at the facility.

AMWU members on the island include riggers, scaffolders, fitters and boilermakers.

They have been negotiating with UGL since the beginning of the year with their agreement expiring on March 31st.

When the company put their bad deal to their 326 workers, a massive 96 per cent voted against it.

UGL claims the cuts are necessary as it only won a new 10-year contract to continue maintenance at the facility by planning to dud its workers.

Workers have rejected the claims and instead voted by a whopping 99 per cent majority to begin a campaign of protected industrial action.



Workers contracted to UGL on rolling industrial action in a call for better pay and conditions.

"It was great to see all the members from all the unions on Barrow Island standing up as one," says AMWU Assistant State Secretary Glenn McLaren.

"UGL should have backed in their workers and put in a tender recognising current rates of pay and they chose not to.

"Now they are trying to get in an agreement to match a tender price, in effect they're asking their workforce to pay for their bad business practices."

The Gorgon gas fields are owned by a consortium of foreign companies including Chevron, Royal Dutch Shell and ExxonMobil. These companies are amongst the most profitable and powerful in the world - but nothing is more powerful than a unionised workforce.

This dispute was ongoing at the time of writing. For updates check out the AMWU WA Facebook page - <https://www.facebook.com/amwuwabranch>. ●

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Vale Steve Cooper

Dedicated working class intellectual, activist and former AMWU staffer Steve Cooper died on May 7 at the age of 93.

Steve was born in 1928 and grew up in Sydney's south-eastern beachside suburbs. His parents - father George, a hat-maker, and mother May, a nanny - were English immigrants from Manchester.

On leaving school, Steve became a pharmacy apprentice and joined the Communist Party of Australia, when it had active suburban branches in Sydney's east from Vaucluse to Botany, along with factory branches with dozens of members.

He worked as a wharfie and in the 1970s as a research officer for the AMWU. He helped research and analyse wage rates across hundreds of workshops in the metal industry. His work set standards of measurement and analysis ahead of those set by the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission.

He was also a key player in the Australian trade union movement's response to the Pinochet coup in Chile. Steve was part of a union delegation that visited Chile in March 1974, seven months after Pinochet's US-backed coup.

The delegation returned to Australia with a comprehensive account of military repression. Their findings, written mainly by Steve, contributed to worldwide condemnation and isolation of the junta and the release of prominent political prisoners. The visit did much to build a Chile solidarity movement in Australia. ●

DELEGATE PROFILE

Allan Pearce

With 43 years of AMWU membership under his belt, Allan Pearce finished up at Moama food processor Simplot in February.

After 23 years as the shop steward on site, Allan was hard to replace. Months after his retirement, his phone still rings with requests for advice.

Allan, or Toey to his mates, inherited the nickname from his dad, but "I've probably lived up to it over the years being a delegate", he laughs.

"I loved being a delegate," he says.

"Money is important, but it's not the main thing, it's more about conditions and lifestyle.

"For example, you can't put a price on an RDO these days, but at that site we just got two RDOs a month."

Allan says his success stemmed from having a strong union with 100 per cent membership among 130 workers standing behind him.

Allan cites three local food processors, "all on the same road, all on EBAs and top wages".

"There is a non-union shop nearby that's not on an EBA. There is an \$18 an hour pay difference. That's a lot of money."

Allan says it's not always easy to maintain 100 per cent density - "if you don't win a battle" it can be a challenge. And some people, especially younger workers, sometimes take convincing. ●





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