Career degradation in Australian cities: globalization, precarity and adversity

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ABSTRACT
This paper explores the impact on urban labour markets of the closure of the Australian automotive manufacturing industry through a qualitative analysis of ex-automotive workers’ experiences of redundancy and precarious work. We locate the experiences of workers inside a multidimensional concept of precarity that can be both objectively measured and subjectively produced. These findings show the need for strong policies directed at boosting the economies of affected urban communities alongside labour market programmes able to provide secure work after large-scale plant closures. Through the voices of affected workers, we demonstrate the complex ways their lives have been affected.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The closure of the Australian automotive industry in 2017 after 70 years of operation represented a significant shock to the Australian economy at both national and local levels. This was reflected in the scale of government responses to the closure with more than A$2.5 billion of support provided to the industry and its workforce as it wound down and in the aftermath of closure (Department of Industry Innovation and Science (DIIS), 2020). As a number of researchers have observed, Australia’s passenger vehicle industry closed through the cumulative impact of several factors, including the shift of production to the Global South, the need to achieve greater economies of scale, restructuring within the parent corporations of the manufacturers and the increased emphasis on product innovation (Beer, 2018; Clibborn et al., 2018; Nieuwenhuis & Wells, 2015). The globalization of the automotive industry (Bailey, 2007, 2010), was pivotal to the shutdown of the sector with plant closures evident also in other developed economies, including the UK (Bailey et al., 2014) and the United States (Cutcher-Gershenfeld et al., 2015). Australia, however, is distinctive in its loss of the entire industry, and as recent research has argued, the closure of such major manufacturing facilities continues to have significant adverse impacts for affected workers (Irving et al., 2022). Critically, this loss of employment, and its impact on the working lives of men and women, has been an urban
phenomenon. It has been in the major cities, and especially the outer suburban areas, that jobs have been lost in both the original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) and in the supply chain. The impacts on urban labour markets have been significant in terms of an elevated unemployment rate, forced early retirement, reduced lifetime earnings and fewer opportunities for skilled employment.

The end of Australia’s car manufacturing industry has taken place in a labour market characterized by increased precarious work (Arnold & Bongiovi, 2013; Bailey & de Ruyter, 2015; Beer et al., 2019) in Australia and globally. Standing (2011) has argued that precarious work has emerged in opposition to, or as a demise of, the standard employment relationship (SER) that constituted the norm in the mid-20th century, at least in the Global North. It is widely accepted that precarious work has increased amid a rolling back of worker protections and a rise in jobs that prioritize the needs of businesses, requiring ever greater employee flexibility and risk. With a highly unionized workforce, Australian car and supply chain manufacturers were workplaces in which a majority of employees benefited from SERs, many of them over decades of employment in what they believed were ‘jobs for life’. Urban labour markets have been acutely affected by this change through the rise of the ‘gig economy’ (Frey & Osborne, 2017; Healy et al., 2017), increased unemployment and underemployment, and digital disruption (Deloitte, 2014) – both now and with the prospect of significant trauma to come.

Many of Australia’s outer urban areas have evolved into places of entrenched disadvantage (Pawson & Herath, 2015; Randolph & Tice, 2014) and the segmented nature of labour markets in Australia has been central to reinforcing this social and economic displacement (Baum et al., 2008). Commonly, those made redundant remain unable to find work if comparable opportunities with their previous employment are not available locally. This localization effect is most evident amongst those in lower skilled occupations (Morrison, 2005). A range of government policies were deployed during the automotive manufacturing closure period, including measures aimed directly at the needs of affected workers in the form of labour market programmes and stimulus measures aimed at improving the local economy. Strategies like the South Australian government’s 2016 Northern Economic Plan sought to engage the local community and plan for the longer term, while other funds and reports drew on the available evidence base from previous large-scale industry adjustments. However, despite being more responsive than programmes offered during previous plant closures, these initiatives fell short of achieving ‘best practice’ in place-based programmes. This was in particular because of their failure to incorporate local leaders, embrace a long-term time frame and engage with the community generally (Barca et al., 2012; Beer et al., 2021).

This paper explores the perspectives of those displaced from Australia’s automotive industry through qualitative analysis. It recognizes that it is not possible to fully understand the lived experience of redundancy and precariousness in the labour market through quantitative analysis alone (Irving et al., 2022) and seeks to provide richer, more personal, insights into the experience of the contemporary urban workforce. Despite the diversity of the sample, the points of convergence evident in our discussions with affected workers raise important questions about the relationship between job quality and precariousness and highlight the overlooked impact of workers’ own life plans and expectations of work on the dynamics of transforming labour markets. In particular, the shock these workers experienced at the new world of precarious work, after long protection in a unionized industry, serves as a reminder of the true extent of this transformation in recent decades. This has implications for policymakers both in Australia and elsewhere in the Global North, where the demise not just of industries or sectors, but of ways of working, complicate the task of economic adjustment.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. It first gives an overview of interventions provided during the closure period by Australian federal and state governments and car manufacturers. Following this, we outline our methods and the context of the study. We then discuss
the dimensions of precarious work and explore theoretical approaches to subjective precarity. From there we proceed to a qualitative analysis of the interviews, in which we pay particular attention to the interrelation between ex-automotive workers’ expectations of work and their experience of the labour market post-closure. Finally, we reflect on the implications for policymakers seeking to mitigate the impacts of large-scale industry restructure and mass job losses through interventions targeted at both individual workers and job markets.

2. STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENT PROGRAMMES DURING THE CLOSURE PERIOD

In 2013, car manufacturers Ford Australia (Ford) and General Motors Holden (GMH) announced the intention to close their Victoria and South Australia manufacturing sites in 2016 and 2017, respectively. Toyota Australia (Toyota) followed suit in 2014 by announcing it would close by the end of 2017. Alongside the earlier shutdown of Mitsubishi Motors Australia Ltd as a domestic manufacturer, these plans signalled the end of Australia’s automotive manufacturing industry. Ultimately around 4000 jobs were lost from OEMs, but the closures also affected the employees of around 150 automotive supply chain businesses in Victoria and South Australia (DIIS, 2020). Job losses were concentrated around large plants, such as Altona in Melbourne (Toyota), Norlane in Geelong (Ford) and the northern suburbs of Adelaide (GMH).

Between the first closure announcement in 2013 and the final plant closures in 2017, and for three years afterwards, the Australian federal government and relevant state governments implemented a number of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs). Some of these extended schemes in place before the closure announcements, as the Australian car manufacturing industry had long been the beneficiary of government support (Beer, 2018). The SAPs that responded directly to the closures, however, broadly took three forms: transition programmes for affected workers; diversification and innovation funding for supply chain businesses; and job creation strategies in the form of funding for sectors, regions, infrastructure and start-ups.

Transition programmes focused on the employability of the retrenched workers. Beyond the provision of job-seeking skills and tools, workers were encouraged to reskill for other industries, such as aged care. Transition programmes for affected workers were funded at both the federal and state government levels, as well as by the OEMs. Australian government measures across a range of distinct schemes, such as the automotive industry SAP and the National Workforce Development Fund, included the provision of career advisory services and localized employment coordinators, jobs fairs and information sessions. It also included funding for training; work-related equipment; licences or travel; and relocation costs related to new employment. These were mirrored in state government schemes such as the Automotive Supply Chain Transition Initiative in Victoria and the Automotive Workers in Transition Program in South Australia (Department of Employment, Skills and Family Business (DESFB), 2019).

Supply chain workers were able to access these initiatives, while the OEMs funded on-site programmes in conjunction with government offerings and often with the collaboration of automotive sector unions. The Ford Transition Program, Toyota’s DRIVE programme and the Holden Transition Centres provided individualized support through case managers, who focused on career planning and training needs assessment. Other services included in some or all of the OEM programmes included: job boards; superannuation advice and retirement preparation; language, numeracy and digital literacy training; and counsellors and well-being and resilience training. Although the closure period was three years, uptake of these services across the programmes was highest around 15–18 months prior to closure (DESFB, 2019).

The scale of innovation in these programmes reflected the fact that the automotive industry closure was unlike any before it. These innovations included: a high level of coordination...
between governments and OEMs, allowing for consistent messaging and information exchange; ongoing assessment and improvement of the programmes and policies, supported by data collection; and connection of affected employees to services based in their local communities. Retrenched workers and their families were also offered enhanced access to employment services post-transition. This history of government intervention in response to the end of passenger vehicle construction in Australia is important because it speaks to the intent of governments and large manufacturers to assist former automotive workers to achieve the best possible outcomes following retrenchment from the sector. However, the impact of such measures on the targeted individuals and households have long been debated (Armstrong et al., 2008; O’Brien & Burrows, 2019; Wooden, 1998) and there is a need to better understand the views of those affected (Anaf et al., 2013) in order to bring to the surface any gaps between policy settings and the lived experience of redundancy.

3. METHODS

The material discussed in this paper is part of a larger study examining how the closure of the major automotive assembly plants has impacted the lives of Australian workers and their communities (Beer et al., 2019). In particular, the research seeks to understand the longer term impacts of job loss on workers’ engagement with the labour force. The study uses a variety of data-collection methods, including a longitudinal survey of affected workers, which Bailey and de Ruyter (2015) note is vital for an understanding of job security following plant closure. However, they also argue the increase in precarious work calls for more complex measures of employment outcomes that account for job quality as well as quantity. Our study therefore includes qualitative interviews designed to capture this complexity by exploring the views and experiences of retrenched workers.

In this paper we draw on individual interviews conducted in 2021 with 28 ex-automotive industry workers from the states of South Australia and Victoria. The randomized sample group comprised both men and women who held a range of positions in the plants, including production line workers, managers, administrative workers and qualified tradespeople. Interviewees included ex-OEM and ex-automotive supply chain company workers, and workers in different career stages. The sample, therefore, provides insights into the job-seeking and employment experiences of people bringing a diverse range of assets to the job market, as well as differing needs and expectations. Despite this, there are notable similarities between the interviewed workers’ experiences, and these similarities underpin our analysis and theoretical approaches here.

Semi-structured interviews explored workers’ engagement with the transition programmes and factors influencing their employment trajectories post-closure, including household needs and personal preferences. Interviews were recorded and fully transcribed, with data storage and analysis supported by the use of NVivo 12, using a coding framework based on emergent interview themes. All interviews have been de-identified to protect participant anonymity and the real names of interviewees have not been used in this article.

4. PRECARY AS A MULTIDIMENSIONAL CONCEPT

The rise in the incidence of precarious work since the later decades of the 20th century has seen a concomitant acceleration of academic scholarship on precarity. Precarious work is defined by a set of insecure labour market conditions that burden workers with the economic risks and uncertainties associated with doing business (Kalleberg, 2018; Standing, 2011). However, researchers have much debated the relationship between precarious work and precarity as a more generalized concept, referring to a set of social conditions brought about by a range of factors, including
precarious work, housing, the incidence of disability and educational attainment (Barnes & Weller, 2020; Campbell & Price, 2016). This debate has produced a multidimensional concept of precarity, which in turn has prompted many scholars to advance the idea of precarization as a more valuable object of study than a ‘static analysis’ of precarity (Alberti et al., 2018; Lorey, 2015; Shukaitis, 2013). Both ideas are relevant to our study, since they underscore how pervasive insecurity is across multiple life domains and societal strata. The experiences of ex-automotive workers demonstrate how the growth of precarious work and precarious lives leads to ‘the loss of grip over a future that once seemed under control, as more and more areas of life are subordinated to the needs of the economy’ (Alberti et al., 2018, p. 449).

Although the precarity literature offers up varying terminology and specific frameworks for understanding and defining precarious work, it is generally viewed as a product of combined conditions in the labour market, the regulatory environment and the job itself (Kalleberg, 2009, 2011, 2018; Standing, 2011; Rodgers, 1989; Vosko, 2009). Standing (2011) denotes labour market security as ‘adequate income-earning opportunities’ (p. 10), differentiating it from other kinds of security related to career and skill development and income stability. However, in emphasizing key aspects of precarious work, Kalleberg recognizes the interrelationship between these factors, leaning on Rodgers’ (1989) concept of the ‘temporal’ dimension of employment relationships, that is, an available continuity of employment. This approach is helpful in understanding the circumstances of former automotive industry workers because it is this loss of continuity and the ongoing search to regain a degree of control that is the key characteristic of their post-closure experiences in the labour market. These workers are not, on the whole, struggling to find any work, but to find work with features that allow them to replicate, or return to some semblance of, their pre-closure working lives.

However, their experiences are not solely the consequence of employment conditions. Critiques of Standing (2011) argue that it is problematic to define precarity according to dimensions of labour-related security alone. On the one hand, it is not always the case that ‘precarious work leads to precarious lives’, as Barnes and Weller’s (2020) study of older retrenched automotive workers has shown. In their study, existing life trajectories at the time of retrenchment combined with generous redundancy packages resulted for some in a high degree of household security due to the ability to pay off debt and the proximity of retirement. For workers in this situation, low-skill, casual work does not represent a risk of falling into precarity, nor a significant interruption to life plans. Where retrenched workers were already on less secure life trajectories, the automotive closures brought with them a greater risk of precarity. Lain et al. (2018) have also shown how precarity exists at the intersection of multiple life domains. In their study of local government and hospitality workers, the extent to which workers were precarious depended not just on the realities of their individual employment situations and the wider job market, but also on levels of household security and available welfare.

Lain et al. (2018) demonstrate how these combined factors come to bear on the risk associated with job loss, not just in objectively measurable terms but subjectively, in that they create a sense of ‘ontological precarity’ among workers whose wider life circumstances make the risk of job loss jeopardous. Ontological precarity, then, is ‘a form of vulnerability or negative insecurity that is experienced by the individual’ (p. 4). In this they draw, via Millar (2017), on the Butlerian notion of precariousness as an ontological condition brought about by the socially contingent nature of life. For Butler, degrees of precariousness are inherent in human life – ‘a common existential and social condition’ (Millar, 2017, p. 4) – if unequally distributed. It is this idea, argues Millar, that has allowed for the extension of the idea of precarity beyond the conditions of labour. The danger here is in producing an idea of precarity too broad to be analytically useful in labour studies (Alberti et al., 2018; Shukaitis, 2013). However, Millar (2017) underscores the value of Butler’s influence on studies that seek ‘to bridge the notion of ontological precariousness

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with an analysis of precarity as a labor condition’ (p. 5) for the way this method of enquiry allows the linking of ‘material conditions’ (p. 5) with lived experience.

This linking is central to our analysis of the experiences of ex-automotive workers, whose ‘material conditions’ include individual financial imperatives – such as the need to pay for housing and support families – as well as the measurable attributes of jobs and the regulatory and practical workings of the labour market. Our interviews illuminate the complex ways in which these interrelate with workers’ subjectively formed expectations about what kind of work is desirable or tenable in the long term, creating an experience of insecure work and interrupted life plans.

5. LIVES INTERRUPTED

The experiences of ex-automotive workers in the job market post-closure have been characterized by a high degree of instability. At the time of interview, most workers in our sample had held at least three jobs since leaving their automotive industry jobs, with eight of the participants reporting between four or more. Some also reported intermittent periods of unemployment; however, on closer examination these periods do not appear to be due to a general lack of jobs, but rather the result of the following factors: a lack of jobs relevant to their skills; the complexities of job-seeking and pathways to secure employment; and a predominance of jobs and workplaces that fall below the standards set by their former employers in car manufacturing and supply chain firms.

It should be noted that these interviews took place in the shadow of the Covid-19 pandemic. Some participants were located in South Australia, where the impacts of the pandemic were heavily mitigated during the first two years by strict border closures and negligible infection rates. Other participants were located in the neighbouring state of Victoria, which in direct contrast to South Australia had by October 2021 experienced the longest cumulative lockdown in the world. Although the majority of interviewees reported little disruption to their working lives as a direct result of the pandemic, largely due to being classed as ‘essential workers’, the general impact of Covid-19 on the economy saw declines in employment and a more volatile labour market.

5.1. Lack of skilled jobs

Qualified workers struggled most noticeably with finding positions in which they could use their qualifications and continue career paths. Engineers and tradespeople were the most likely to report frustration with the availability of work relevant to their specializations. These workers were generally able to find work of some sort, but because the work was not in line with their skills and career goals, it did not make them feel like their job search was over. Rather, they were motivated to continue looking for a preferred position. Robert, a production engineer from a supply firm, echoed the position of many interviewees when he observed that ‘to get a job, any job is not that hard. Yeah. But to get an engineering job, fairly hard’ (20).

The problem of job quality also affected unskilled workers with specific workplace training and experience, including supervisory roles, who, like the qualified workers, were able to find positions, but felt frustrated at the lack of opportunity to apply their knowledge and skills. Sarah, who previously worked at GMH, described her disappointment with an agency job:

So it was originally a Quality Assurance role, which quickly transitioned to just hard labour. … I think they just sort of present the job in a rosier light … because the work’s not exactly fun stuff, but very repetitious. (23)
Workers also found their skills were not always considered transferable due to a focus on industry-specific experience. Tony, a former business unit manager for a second large firm in the automotive supply chain, found:

if I apply for a defence job, then you needed 10 years’ experience and they would be very, very specific about it, in fact to the point that you don’t even bother applying. … I looked at jobs that I was well over-qualified for, well within my capabilities, and you just couldn’t get to the table for an interview. (16)

For Adam, the automotive closures were one of multiple interruptions to his engineering career. Having joined Toyota after closures in the aerospace sector, he found project work after the automotive closures as a structural piping engineer in the construction industry. When that came to a finish, he encountered the focus on industry-specific experience that had held others back, explaining that ‘12 months as a superintendent is not what people want. They want at least 10 years minimum experience’. In any case, he was ultimately thwarted by the dearth of roles available:

In the whole of Australia, I think there was three structural mechanical piping superintendents on SEEK … [w]e had a friend who needed a house painted, so I did that. And then I just went, you know, I’m just gonna go out on my own doing property maintenance. (22)

While Adam’s experiences ultimately led him to give up on his engineering career, the experience of Robert highlighted the pitfalls of ‘holding out’. Four years after the closures, he said:

I just get five months ago back to the engineering industry, although I’m stepping down. I mean, what you call it, I start from the bottom again? Yeah. At least, finally, I can get it back to utilise my skill. (20)

This process of ‘starting from the bottom’ was not confined, however, to those seeking a return to qualified positions. We will now explore the ways in which jobseekers of all skill levels found the experience to be built into common hiring practices.

5.2. Labour hiring practices and pathways to job security

For many automotive workers, generous redundancy payments meant early retirement or semi-retirement, the ability to pay off mortgages or add to retirement savings, or a significant reduction in mortgage size (Barnes & Weller, 2020). For others, however, the imperative was to find work as soon as possible in order to meet household costs. This meant taking whatever jobs and hours became available:

If you have family and house mortgage to be paid. You have to choose whatever the job in front of you to pick up. (20)

This is not the best paying job, you know, it’s not the best work, it’s just repetitive online sort of prep work. Yeah. But it’s a job, you know, I mean, like, it’s a job in hand. (25)

So labour hire, I just pretty much I just said yes to everything. And that’s the way, that’s the work in labour hire. If you start saying no, then you go to the back of the list. (22)

Much of this work was gained through job agencies and was casual in nature. Although for many workers it was taken on as a stopgap, they also recognized casual agency work as a pathway to more secure employment. However, it was a pathway with numerous obstacles, and which had to be navigated in particular ways. The first of these was the demands of the recruitment process:
When I was a lot younger and I temped just for a short time, it was so simple. All you would do was you would meet the agency and the agency will ring and say we’ve got a job for you, start there tomorrow. Whereas now even, even for a week, you have to go and have an interview and it’s a long process. (1)

Do you know, I’ve never jumped so many hurdles … now you gotta have, you know, like so many references. … I’ve never even had that many jobs, let alone seven references. (25)

The second observation relates to a practice of informal probation: ‘So you go through these agencies, you do six months at least on casual. Yep. And then if they like you, you get a chance’ (25). However, even for those who worked hard to prove themselves, or who were offered a chance at permanency, there was no guarantee that casual work would lead to more secure contractual arrangements or better hours:

I couldn’t see a future. Yeah. So I would just continue to look around … because I couldn’t see them taking me any further than casual. (4)

And they keep saying we’ll make you full time, we’ll make you full time … [but] nothing happened. (21)

Workers also acknowledged the pitfalls of the ‘take anything’ approach. First, commitment to one place of work reduced the flexibility of jobseekers to attend interviews. With the processes to find even casual agency work quite involved and arduous, this could be a significant barrier:

They just say, grab the first job. … But from what my experience is … when you’re a casual, you know, what happens is that when you start going for job interviews, you know, they’ll say, Oh, yeah, can you work tomorrow, and you say nah I’ve got a job interview … it can be quite difficult. (2)

In addition to logistical barriers around attending interviews, working long hours also left less time to prepare job applications. This was especially a problem when the work was physically demanding:

If you don’t have a job, you can, like concentrate on finding a job. … I’m only able to do like a proper preparation for my resume or cover letter to apply a job during the weekend time. During the daytime, it’s too tiring for me, especially because I work physically as a forklift driver or picker packer. (20)

What is evident here is an intersection of factors including the reliance on casual labour by many employers, as well as the hiring practices of both agencies and firms. This convergence is driven by employers’ desire (1) for a workforce with a high degree of flexibility and (2) to use casual appointments as a de facto probationary period before entering into longer term employment contracts. However, unlike a probationary period written into a fixed-term or ongoing contract, there is no formal mechanism that ensures there will be an opportunity to transition into a more secure arrangement. Pathways to secure employment are therefore complex in a number of ways: first, in the demands made on jobseekers to fulfil lengthy, often challenging pre-employment obligations; and then in the way they must navigate a set of informal rules and practices around probation and the employers’ changing needs. Importantly, they embark on this with no guarantees that the pathway will lead to a secure arrangement with the hours they need.

5.3. Drivers of employment change

The workers we interviewed had experienced a high rate of job loss since the closures, in stark contrast to their often-lengthy tenures at their former firms in the automotive sector. The key reasons cited for losing positions were: (1) the position was short term in nature, for example, project work; and (2) firms no longer needed employees due to the loss of contracts, sector
closures, or Covid-19. Importantly, few employees reported they were let go due to conflict with management or poor work performance. High rates of job loss had implications for longer term security, because, as we have argued, finding a secure job is often a lengthy and uncertain process.

Our research also highlighted how pathways to security are further complicated by factors such as job quality and satisfaction, workplace safety and work culture. For many ex-automotive workers, a secure job is not simply defined by contractual arrangements with employers, but by whether it is tenable in the long term on more subjective measures. Frequently, workers have found themselves in workplaces that do not measure up to the standards they enjoyed in the automotive industry, causing them to leave without another job to go to, or to stay on for only as long as it takes to find another job.

One main reason cited for leaving workplaces was safety. This extended to work practices as well as workplace bullying, both of which created an unsafe environment:

The environment is not conducive. So it’s like a lot of bullying and harassment. (20)

I got a job as a prefabrication supervisor … and I worked there for a couple of years. And that was absolutely horrible, horrible, horrible … just the safety stuff, you know, like they talked a lot of safety, but there was never much action. You know, they didn’t seem to be taking it seriously … just a bullying culture. (23)

Many of these problems were seen to be a result of poor management:

[Company name] was a pretty toxic environment to tell you the truth. I didn’t really like the management side of things. That’s why I left in the end. (11)

So one of the managers or a senior at [company name], he was very inconsistent in his management style. Like one minute he’d be talking the talk next minute, he’d be wandering around waving a sword … Some customer gave him a sword as a gift once and every now and then he’d just wander around the office waving it around. (6)

But poor management was not just the cause of unsafe work environments. It also created workplace culture that made it difficult for ex-automotive workers to assimilate, or to do their work in a satisfying way:

There was no direction. I wasn’t happy with my manager who basically threw me in the deep end. And I tried to introduce a lot of continuous improvement type things, but he – there was no support there. It took a little while for the staff to get used to me and my management style. In fact, there’s a few of the blokes that didn’t get used to it all. (17)

The other [manager] told me, why didn’t I stretch the work? This one is telling me, don’t rock the boat. I don’t want any of these jobs, but sometimes you just close your eyes. (14)

I went to work for [company name] for two days … and I couldn’t do that job. It was absolutely disgusting. It was hot. They were arrogant towards you. (15)

At other times, the work itself was simply unsatisfying or unpleasant in its own right:

The quality of work is pretty basic, which is why the pay was crap, I guess. (11)

It was really, really boring, but at the same time, there was so much of it. It was so boring. And there wasn’t a lot of people contact. So I didn’t like that either. (1)
That job was just disgusting. It’s just filthy. And you went home, and it’s all sticky stuff everywhere, all over you. And like, yeah. Stuff in your nose and in your mouth. You could taste it. And it was just, it was a health hazard. (24)

Interviewees often described their impression of the job market in which they found themselves post-closure as one where job conditions are largely unregulated, to the detriment of workers:

Profit was the ultimate winner, regardless of safety, wellbeing and all that sort of gear. (6)

It’s just very, very dodgy … it’s sad, really sad to think that there’s, like, these places out there. And there’s so many of them and they’re operating the way they do and, and nobody’s really controlling any of it. (24)

### 5.4. Longer term impacts

Ultimately, for many, these poor conditions accumulated into an experience of job-seeking and work that became very detrimental over time. One impact was on attitudes towards jobseeking:

I would like [to leave this job and look for something] permanent. But I really don’t want to go into another workplace like [company name], it really, really scarred me. (1)

It’s been a lot of turn down and then yeah, and sort of like, what you call it, I have to put an effort. And then it’s a bit like, reluctant to do it again … [it’s] demoralising. (20)

Others expressed the serious impacts on their financial and mental well-being:

It was very difficult, up until this job. Four years, it took me to, to establish myself in another permanent role. Quite stressful given that I’ve got a mortgage and debts too. (4)

I’ll just say the last four years have been the worst four years in my life … [because of] money and stress. (26)

Undoubtedly, the employment trajectories of ex-automotive workers bear many of the hallmarks of what we have come to understand as ‘precarious work’. Four years on from the closures, some workers’ lives are beginning to settle as they find their way into new career directions and opportunities, or find their way back to jobs in which they can use their qualifications, although some of these plans have been delayed by the Covid-19 pandemic:

I was going back to school, I’m trying to get my training ticket, but COVID has kind of messed with me a little bit. I was pretty close to finishing and then COVID and I couldn’t finish the last sort of placement, that sort of thing. And I just couldn’t get through so I have to go back to it when COVID’s sort of finished, you know. (25)

I’m in the middle of becoming a bus driver … [it’s] something new and a good challenge and something worthwhile … maybe give something back to the community. Do something good. … You know, make yourself feel better. … You know, working for a pretty big company, you got pretty good conditions and stuff like that, pretty much a company, you know, similar to what Holden’s used to be, I guess. (24)

However, many reflected in this way on how their experience in the automotive industry shaped a set of expectations about work and workplace standards that they now understood to be out of step with work conditions in the ‘real world’:

You do walk in after being at Holden’s and have certain expectations or ideas on how things should be, you know, it’s not going to be exactly the same, but it was just so far removed from Holden’s where I just couldn’t believe, yeah, it didn’t gel with me. (23)
Not my dream job because of the way – they’re not as disciplined as Toyota, let’s put it that way. … I just miss Toyota, I miss their way of working. Building up you as a person, as a team. (14)

6. DISCUSSION: THE FIRST-PERSON EXPERIENCE OF REDUNDANCY

Qualitative interviews and their analysis have the capacity to shed new light on our understanding of the dynamics and consequences of labour market transformation and transforming urban environments (Maginn, 2006). The analysis presented here contributes to the development of a better informed evidence base regarding the experience of displaced workers in post-closure labour markets and their impacts on the economies of cities and the regions within them (Beer et al., 2019).

Our interviews with ex-automotive workers reveal a dominant theme to be their struggle since the closures to find and maintain jobs that are comparable with their automotive industry jobs: that is, safe, well-paid, reliable and satisfying work in line with their skills. Kalleberg (2018) emphasizes a lack of comparable jobs in the market as a key aspect of job insecurity, but in conjunction with a high risk of job loss. Beyond a lack of comparability, jobs taken up by ex-automotive workers fulfill recognized dimensions of precarious work (Burgess & Campbell, 1998; Kalleberg, 2018; Standing, 2011), such as: unpredictable and unsatisfactory work schedules (too few hours or too many, or undesirable shifts); low wages; few opportunities for advancement, skill reproduction or skill retention; unsafe workplaces; and casual or short-term employment arrangements. While this last factor constitutes a risk of job loss, many ex-automotive workers have found permanent positions, albeit in jobs they find unsatisfactory on the above dimensions. Such cases raise important questions and contribute to the debate about the overlap between job quality and precariousness in a transforming labour market (Burgess & Campbell, 1998; Campbell & Price, 2016; Kalleberg, 2018).

Indeed, this understanding of precarious work, in its quest for a framework that enables a degree of measurability, has been criticized for its inability to recognize the diverse ways in which increasing precariousness impacts on a range of employment contexts, or advances our understanding of the drivers of precarization (Alberti et al., 2018). In the case of our study, it overlooks a key dynamic in the employment trajectories of ex-automotive workers, for whom redundancy is not always the driver of employment change and the resulting insecurity. Rather, workers are often motivated to leave jobs that do not fulfill their expectations of work, even if this means re-navigating lengthy and demanding recruitment processes and informal probationary periods as casual employees, with no guarantee of permanent positions. We therefore posit that the engagement of individuals with the transition programmes has mattered far less to longer term employment outcomes than (1) the dynamics of the labour market, and (2) the attitudes and feelings of retrenched workers about the comparability of new jobs to their lost jobs in the automotive industry. We argue that even in a market where ‘income-earning opportunities’ (Standing, 2011, p. 10) are not hard to come by, those opportunities reshape the life plans of workers and create an experience of insecurity. It drives jobseeking behaviours that, although they may be based in an expectation of comparable work, can serve to delay job security when that expectation is misplaced. In so doing, we locate the experiences of workers inside a multidimensional concept of precarity that can be both objectively measured and subjectively produced (Alberti et al., 2018; Kalleberg, 2009, 2018).

There is an important broader urban dimension to these findings: workers have left the automotive industry and have entered a labour market that prioritizes flexibility and responsiveness. For employees this results in short-term contracts, casual work, informal extended probation and the need to remain constantly engaged with job search. All of these erode the sense of control individuals previously held with respect to their working lives. Government assistance
clearly helped many ex-automotive workers enter into, and navigate, this new-to-them labour market, but wider questions remain about the balance and adequacy of a focus on labour market adjustment alone. It can be argued that stronger policies and programmes directed at boosting the economies of affected communities would have had complementary benefits, allowing workers – and their households – to adjust to employment that better meets their needs. There is clear evidence that place-based polices can provide solutions to the challenges of urban communities and their residents and these advantages are unable to be delivered by conventional labour market measures (Barca et al., 2012; Bentley & Pugalis, 2014). There can be no doubt that part of the solution to challenges of large-scale plant closures is investment in the cities that hosted them.

7. CONCLUSIONS

This paper set out to understand the impact of the closure of the Australian car industry on the lives of affected workers as well as the implications for outer urban areas of the nation’s major cities. It set out to gain these insights through qualitative interviews, as a way of giving ‘voice’ to the lived experience of former automotive workers and understanding outcomes. It sought to understand how these outcomes have been perceived by those made redundant, and in so doing provide insight into both the experience of these former automotive-manufacturing regions, and that of every other community in the Global North affected by economic restructuring and industry loss. Rodriguez-Pose (2018) has drawn attention to the ways in which abrupt change in local economies generates communities of discontent, which in turn leads to a rise in the popularity of regressive populist politics. Both ‘branch plant’ cities and the former industrial areas of major metropolitan areas in have been acutely affected in many mature economies, with population-wide factors such as lower rates of educational attainment, higher unemployment and lower incomes adding to their marginalization (Dijkstra et al., 2020). These a priori conditions act to entrench inequality in these places while simultaneously limiting the capacity of affected households and the community as a whole to give voice to their concerns.

Our analysis started with a recognition of the increasing incidence of both precarious work and precarious lives in many developed economies. It found clear evidence that many ex-automotive workers have become marginalized in the workforce: only able to secure work that does not match their skills and experience; limited to short-term contracts or casual work; placed in unsafe working environments; exposed to bullying and harassment; and disconnected from others in their workplaces. For some qualified workers such as engineers, it meant taking more junior positions after years out of the field; or even the abandonment of the field altogether through frustration with a lack of available positions or an inability to overcome employer preferences for industry-specific experience. These outcomes have contributed to the loss of skills from the labour market at a time when employers continue to advocate for the expansion of the qualified workforce through either immigration or additional investment in education and training.

More broadly, the findings reflect significant dysfunction in blue collar industries, which disproportionately affects the employment structure of outer urban areas where such industries are located. Too few ex-automotive workers found continuing, well paid and safe employment, and this precarious employment contributed to greater precarity in the lives of households and their communities. Such insights, of course, are not limited to those formerly in the automotive industry: the sector is a bellwether of wider changes evident across many other parts of Australia’s cities. They speak to the fragility and vulnerability of households and the potential for entrenched intergenerational disadvantage. New solutions are needed to better position both workers affected by redundancy and the places that accommodate them, through more visionary
policies articulated and implemented specifically for local economies and labour markets. This broader – urban policy – perspective is likely to generate greater opportunity for renewal and better employment outcomes in an ever-changing labour market.

NOTE

1 All numbering attached to quotes refers to interviewee numbers. All data will be made available on the Australian data archive after 2025.

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