Moreover, the 'multiplier effect' of job creation in this sector was very low and confined to the service sector itself. The expansion of the service sector in the Illawarra region was restrained by a lack of parts-time and low-paid employment available in the region as a whole and slower than in lawarra had been slower than in the other two groups, in absolute terms) the equivalent figure was 5.4%. Our survey of ex-steelworkers showed that only a third of them had found employment subsequent to leaving the steelworks and among the non-anglophone migrants surveyed only one had found employment outside the manufacturing sector.

The arrival of news helicopters on the university’s football field is an event usually confined to periods when the Wallabies are training there; and we are unaccustomed to the release of an ‘academic’ report resulting in a large colour photograph of one of the authors on the front page of the region’s main newspaper, as well as extensive coverage elsewhere. It was all a bit of a worry.

No author, of course, actively dislikes his or her work getting some recognition. The real worry was that none of us thought that the report contained much that was particularly newsworthy in the sense that it might have come as a surprise to any moderately well-informed resident of this country. It certainly should have surprised nobody in the region.

The main findings of the report were straightforward enough. We found that the industrial restructuring of the 1980s had led to a massive contraction in the demand for labour in the steel, associated manufacturing and coal industries and that this contraction of demand resulted from sectoral forces, most of them related to labour-replacing technological change; that labour displaced from the manufacturing sector had not been absorbed into the expanding service sector; that expansion of the service sector in the Illawarra had been slower than in the nation as a whole and slower than in NSW as a whole; and that jobs in the service sector had a strong likelihood of being both part-time and low-paid. Moreover, the ‘multiplier effect’ of job creation in this sector was very low and confined to the service sector itself (at least regionally).
only limited latitude to pick which workers it kept and which it 'shed': as a result, some rather strange things have happened to the composition of the workforce at the Port Kembla plant. The most notable is that the characteristics of the workers who left the plant do not seem to have been markedly different from those who are still there. In other words, the smaller workforce of the 90s is probably just as badly educated, just as lacking in English language skills, and just as disadvantaged as the labour force of the 70s when it comes to benefiting from now modish projects such as 'worker lifetime education'. Thus, the proportion of southern European-born workers employed in the Port Kembla plant in 1990 was actually higher than it was in 1980 and, for all the talk of a 'new workplace culture', it is the factory fodder of the old workplace culture (as well as management socialised in the 'old' culture) who will have to produce it.

Meanwhile, back in the Lakeside suburbs where migrant workers are concentrated, there are crippling rates of long-term unemployment which no realistically predictable rate of economic growth is going to cure. Workers in their 40s who do not speak any more than rudimentary English, whose educational background is poor and whose skills, acquired on the job, have been rendered valueless on the labour market because of technological change have few job prospects.

And not just in these suburbs, of course. Although it is true that the Illawarra has some fairly distinctive regional characteristics, it is by no means a unique case. What is happening in this region is happening all over Australia's rust belt, in Newcastle, in Geelong, in Adelaide and, with a vengeance, in Melbourne. An industrial workforce recruited (to a large extent from overseas) to service a particular sort of industrial system is finding itself stranded by the changes which are being forced upon that system. The section of this workforce which has managed to stay in manufacturing industry is faced with demands which it is ill-equipped to handle and the section which has been 'shed' is largely, as things stand, without hope of getting work.

It need hardly be said that the task of producing this study was not a happy one. The sheer scale of devastation in the lives of working people which has taken place over the last 15 years is the material of the study: and the apparent inability, or, more correctly, refusal, of the political class even to acknowledge what is happening forms its backdrop. But maybe there is a dim ray of hope to be discerned in the story of our study. I started by expressing the surprise we felt that our report was, in the context of such things, such a big story as far as the media were concerned. It could have been just a slow news day, of course, but I would argue something else. Whatever its other shortcomings, the media has to sell, and that involves at least partially holding up a mirror to the deep concerns of the people who buy. Our study, in a small way, mirrored the crisis of the Australian economy. It focused what people can see happening all around them: things which they look at and which make them wonder what the hell is going on.

When they look to the politicians for an answer to this question they get replies which they do not understand and certainly don't believe. Perhaps the interest in our study was a tiny expression of this increasing gap between people's lived reality and the way in which politicians try to interpret it for them. Or maybe it was just a slow news day.

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