

Canadian Auto Workers official denounces GM strike

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The Quebec director of the Canadian Auto Workers Union has condemned workers at the General Motors Saturn assembly plant in Spring Hill, Tennessee, for voting in favor of strike action.

Sunday's strike vote by the Saturn workers brought to four the number of United Auto Workers locals that are threatening to join 9,200 workers at two GM parts plants in Flint, Michigan on the picket lines. The largest industrial dispute in the US in 15 years, the Flint strike has paralyzed virtually all GM operations in North America and forced the layoff of 200,000 GM workers, including the 1,500 workers employed at GM's Ste. Therese, Quebec assembly plant.

'The more the [strike] movement grows, the greater the risk,' that GM will permanently close the Ste. Therese plant, lamented the CAW's Luc Desnoyers. 'For us the strike means we have stopped production of the 1998-99 model. The strike increases insecurity.'

The attempt by Desnoyers to blame the strike for the closure of the Ste. Therese plant, which virtually all auto analysts agree is imminent, cannot withstand even the most superficial analysis. Retooled to build Camaros and Firebirds in 1987, thanks to an interest-free, 30-year government loan of \$200 million, the Ste. Therese plant can produce 200,000 vehicles per year. But because of a sharp drop in demand for these models--sales fell 11 percent last year and have fallen 45 percent since 1994--the plant has been running at less than half of capacity for the past three years. Meanwhile, GM has cut the work force at Ste. Therese from 3,200 to just 1,500. Another 200 workers were slated to be laid off had the plant reopened from vacation last week.

The Ste. Therese plant's production mandate for the Camaro and Firebird is set to expire in 2001. According to all reports, its renewal does not enter into GM's plans

to maintain its market share and boost its rate of return under conditions of an anticipated global car glut. Rather the Ste. Therese plant is seen as among the first that will be closed as part of a global reorganization that is expected to result in the elimination of more than 50,000 GM jobs in the US and Canada.

The Flint strike and the strike votes at the Saturn plant and at GM plants in Dayton, Ohio, and Indianapolis, are the beginnings of a movement of resistance against GM's plans. They signal a new militancy on the part of US auto workers in opposition to the UAW's policy of corporatist collaboration, which has seen the union work with the automakers to slash jobs and wages for the past two decades.

Far from associating themselves with this opposition movement, Desnoyers and the CAW are attempting to whip up nationalist sentiment against it, for they recognize it as a threat to their own corporatist program.

The CAW's response to the closure threat at Ste. Therese has been to try to convince GM that it will be more profitable for it to shut other plants and slash jobs elsewhere. 'Why close a productive plant, especially when it's profitable to make car in Canada?' asked Desnoyers. He then observed that because of the difference in the values of the Canadian and US dollars, and Canada's public-financed health care system, GM can employ five workers in Canada for what it costs to employ four in the US. 'Quebec,' added the CAW official, 'is a safe place for investments.' While there have been close to 20 strikes at GM operations in the US in the past three years, there has only been one strike against GM of Canada during the past decade, boasted Desnoyers

The CAW's other tack to 'save' the Ste. Therese plant has been to enlist the support of what it calls 'les forces

vivres' [the dynamic forces] of Quebec to pressure GM to maintain a production facility in Quebec. These 'forces vivres' include the federal Liberal and provincial Parti Quebecois governments and Quebec's largest corporations, Bombardier, Alcan and Hydro-Quebec. All these companies have mounted their own drives to slash costs at the expense of their workers. As for the Liberals and the pro-Quebec separatist PQ, fervently supported by the Quebec wing of the CAW, they have imposed massive cuts in social spending in their respective jurisdictions so that tax rates can be lowered and the unemployed driven into low-wage jobs, thus making Canada and Quebec more profitable for investors.

Desnoyers and his fellow bureaucrats have maintained a studious silence on the fact that the closure of the Ste. Therese plant would be part of an international assault on auto workers' jobs, wages and working conditions. Now that the Flint workers' strike has drawn attention to GM's global plans, their reaction is to denounce the US strikers. 'If they are fighting in the US,' declared Desnoyers, 'it is to keep jobs for themselves.'

Desnoyers's attitude toward the strike movement in the US expresses the opposition not only of the CAW bureaucracy, but of their counterparts the world over, beginning with the UAW, to any action that raises the possibility and necessity of uniting auto workers internationally and rejecting the subordination of auto workers' jobs and wages to the exigencies of the capitalist market.



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