

Detroit Chrysler workers react to company plans to slash 26,000 jobs

"It's going to mean longer lines at the employment center"

Larry Roberts
31 January 2001

Workers throughout DaimlerChrysler's US-based Chrysler Group are reacting to Monday's announcement that the company will wipe out 26,000 jobs and shut down six plants over the next three years. The layoffs will affect workers in the US as well as in Canada, Mexico, Argentina and Brazil.

The planned job cuts amount to 20 percent of the US division's workforce, and will affect 19,000 hourly and 6,800 salaried workers' jobs. The company says it will complete 75 percent of the layoffs by the end of the year. All of the white-collar job cuts, however, will be completed by March 31, as these salaried workers have no protection through labor contracts or seniority.

The Detroit area will be hit especially hard. Chrysler is the largest employer in the city of Detroit, and the headquarters of DaimlerChrysler AG's Chrysler Group is located in Auburn Hills, a northern suburb. The Mound Road engine plant on Detroit's east side is one of the plants slated to close. The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to workers outside the plant after they learned of Chrysler's announcement.

Alex Bourkoulas, who was hired in 1994, commented, "It's going to mean longer lines at the employment center, a lot less spending. Detroit has five plants with Chrysler. It will definitely mean less jobs and hard times for the younger worker. That's definite."

Two thousand workers presently work at the Mound Road plant, which produces the V8 and V10 engines. Chrysler plans to "indefinitely idle" the facility and transfer production to the newer Mack I and Mack II plants, also on the city's east side. Only about 1,000 workers, or half the workforce, will find jobs at the new plant.

Ed Cox has 31 years at Chrysler: "A lot of people are going to be laid off. Mack I—which builds the V-8 that's replacing our engine—is full already.

"But at Mack II they need 200 people to go to that plant. If they need some more maybe they will take them from here, but maybe they won't. Maybe people will be placed in the pool and there will be more people in the pool than those who will be working. It's an open question as to what they are going to do for jobs."

Crystal Parker, who began working for Chrysler in 1998, said, "We are supposed to be transferred to Mack II, but with all of the plants closing, well, I don't know. If we do get laid off it's going to be some tough times for people. I'm trying to complete my college degree to have something to fall back on."

Wanda Saxton added, "I have only been here for 10 months. I'll stay until they close the entire plant in 2002. I work on the line. Before I came here I was working for a doctor. This is a lot better pay, so it is really going to hurt.

"The union hasn't said much. I'll have to try my best perhaps and get another job. But what can you do? Like a lot people, I was glad to be able to work here. I am prepared to work hard, but that doesn't matter."

Another woman worker commented, "I only have two and a half more years to retire. I think it's a raw deal for the less seniority people. I know what it's like when I was laid off. I've been there—it's rough."

James, a worker with three years seniority, said, "Two years ago when we went on strike we fought for those jobs at Mack I and Mack II. The Mack II plant is just now getting up and running. They will be making the engine for the new Liberty car that is coming out. They agreed to take us before they took other laid-off

people. We have first rights. That's our home plant now, not Mound Road.

"I guarantee you, without a doubt, that by the end of the year this plant will be closed. They have us working overtime. Everybody else is getting laid off and we are working overtime. We have so many engines they don't know what to do with them. Our warehouses are full of engines and we are working nine and ten hours. They are probably stockpiling them because they plan to close the plant.

"Yeah, it's coming, but it's part of working in the auto industry. It's not just the auto workers here but it's also the suppliers. I hear it all the time in the department where I work. A supplier will come in and say they are laying off like crazy.

"The union has said they will not reopen the contract. But when times get bad, jobs are on the line. There's no white and black, there are so many gray areas in terms of what they can do or what they can get away with and what management wants them to do."

Alfonzo Banister spoke to the WSWS about the impact the layoffs would have on younger workers at the plant: "Most of these young guys went out and bought new cars, some bought new houses. It's going to get kind of rough for them. I went through that in 1980. I know how it is, but I've got 32 years so I am safe in a way. I feel sorry for the rest of them. There are a lot of guys with 1998 or 1999 seniority and it's going to be rough.

"On job security, you need at least 10 years to be safe. You know a lot of these guys are not going to be able to get the kind of job that would pay like Chrysler. The new guys are paid \$13 or \$14 per hour and the older workers get approximately \$20 an hour. There is a two-tier wage agreement."

Greg Poe, a skilled trades electrician, explained how he thought the layoffs would affect him: "I have only been here for six months, so if I get laid off I am just out of a job without benefits. I know that it's not just Chrysler. GM is going through the same thing, they are laying off a lot of people

"I used to work at a molding plant in Grand Rapids. We worked mainly for the Big Three, but also for furniture and retail. This is my first venture into the auto industry. Getting laid off wouldn't be a good thing, but if I have to I will go out and get another job.

"I didn't buy a house or new car. I noticed when I got

here that things weren't going too well so I put off buying any new big items. I decided to take advantage of the good pay for as long as I could. I live up in the Flint area. I didn't want to buy a new \$150,000 house and a new Dodge truck and all of a sudden lose my job and not be able to pay for it. So I have been holding off.

"Officially the company is not supposed to be allowed to close the plant because of the contract. What they can do to get around that is to lay everybody off, but not officially close the plant. It's called 'idling' the plant. They don't close the plant and it also denies some people the transfer rights that they would normally have."

Many workers expressed bitterness over Chrysler's announcement, following the sacrifices and concessions made by workers over the past years as the company's profits soared. Karim Ziyadeh, who has worked for the company for 32 years, said, "I was laid off in 1981 for nearly two years. Then it was really bad. I hope that it isn't like that. At that time I lost four dollars an hour in pay. The cut was to save Chrysler, and while they gave some of it back, you never get it all. I don't mind giving up some in pay as long as you keep a job."

Another worker added, "They have been trying to close this plant for 25 years. This is the fault of management, not the workers. When we came back in 1984 they had signs all over the walls saying: 'Don't let this happen again.' They wanted to blame us for what happened."

Mike Butler commented, "I think Chrysler executives abused the company. Look at how much money they took out. They took the money and ran. The top gets the money and we get the crumbs."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact