

As GM layoffs mount, more nationalist poison from Canadian auto workers union

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In a new blow to auto workers at the sprawling General Motors assembly complex in Oshawa, Ontario, GM announced this week that about 1,000 employees at the soon to be closed truck plant near Toronto will be temporarily laid off for up to eight weeks over the course of the next six months.

The announcement comes on the heels of a decision taken earlier this month by the company to permanently shutter the truck plant and let go 2,600 workers sometime in the latter half of 2009. The closure decision was taken by corporate executives despite supposed assurances given to Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) union that new hybrid product lines would be allocated to the plant in exchange for the massive concessions the union agreed to in the newly negotiated master contract agreement.

When GM cited a standard loophole clause in the deal that tied production to market conditions, the CAW leadership's policy of trading concessions for "job security" was exposed as a fraud.

Historically the CAW pointed to certain cost advantages for the auto companies—including a favourable exchange rate with the US dollar and a government-paid health care benefits—to argue that layoffs be carried out in the US, Mexico and other countries, rather than Canada. The sharp decline of the dollar, the collapse of sales of gas-guzzling SUVs and pick-ups and the financial instability of the Big Three US auto makers have all undermined the nationalist policy of the CAW.

In order to provide an avenue for the angered membership to blow off steam and move the spotlight away from its own abysmal failings, the union organized several publicity stunts, including a protest in front of GM's national headquarters building and a plea to the big business parties in the federal parliament

to resurrect the principles contained in the former Canada-US Auto Pact, which required auto makers to produce one vehicle in Canada for each vehicle they sold there.

These undertakings were little more than cynical stunts. The right wing Tory government of Stephen Harper, supported in this matter by the Liberals, have no intention of altering trade policies that have benefitted their paymasters in the business world. In any event, the fact that the Auto Pact was struck down as illegal by the World Trade Organization in 2001 was argument enough for them to ignore the CAW appeal.

Meanwhile, at the protest in front of GM headquarters, GM's critical operations were left entirely unscathed whilst the union quietly acquiesced to a cease and desist order from the local Superior Court. When a protest convoy of automobiles briefly blocked supplies from entering the truck plant, Chris Buckley, CAW Local 222 president, personally intervened to relieve the bottleneck. How could it be otherwise? Since the beginning of the dispute, the union has assured GM of their opposition to any strike action by the membership.

Even the union's pending grievance in front of the Ontario Labour Board is little more than a fig leaf. Although GM may be required to address certain procedural violations stemming from their closure announcement, there is no chance that the property rights of the company will be undermined by the court. This much was admitted by CAW President Buzz Hargrove, who said, "We're going to look at what our legal options are. Quite frankly, we're not overly enthused by that. In the history of the courts or labour boards or arbitrators, we can't find anywhere they've forced a company to invest or keep a plant open once they've made the decision to get out."

All of the actions by the CAW have been aimed at preventing auto workers from drawing the necessary conclusions about the efficacy—or indeed, non-efficacy—of the union’s bankrupt nationalist perspective. If the real anger of auto workers in Oshawa and elsewhere across the province has thus far been contained by the union leadership, it has been as a direct result of the confusion and misdirection sown amongst the membership by the CAW bureaucracy and its supporters.

One needs only to peruse the pages of the monthly newsletters put out by the various auto workers locals to see the constant bombardment of national chauvinist ideology. Auto workers are told that they are engaged in a fratricidal struggle for jobs, wages and conditions against their class sisters and brothers across the globe. They are told that the only way to defend themselves is to work harder, accept concessions and sufficiently enrich auto company shareholders so that the layoff and closure axe will fall instead on workers in other plants in other countries. Of course, the workers in those other countries are told the same thing by their own unions. And the race to the bottom continues.

A recent column in *The Oshaworker*, the official organ of CAW Local 222, by long-time union functionary Ron Carlyle reveals the depth of these reactionary nostrums within the union bureaucracy.

In the May 2008 edition, Carlyle, the current Car Plant Area Chairperson at the Oshawa complex, writes: “On a recent vacation to the United States; I got upset seeing people driving non-domestic vehicles. I had several (let’s call them discussions) with so-called “proud Americans” who proudly display their American flag on the back of the imports they drive. For instance, I said to them that one of the recent darkest days in America was the tragic 9-11 disaster. They agreed. Then I asked if Afghanistan or Iraq opened dealerships in the US would they buy vehicles from them? They strongly replied negatively (good). I then asked them to look back in history and think of another dark day in America of Pearl Harbour, and why they now buy vehicles from Japan, after all it is the same people who 60 plus years ago tried to destroy you...”

If chauvinism is indeed the last refuge of a scoundrel, Carlyle is most surely at journey’s end. The statement, later reported approvingly in the minutes of a local

union leadership meeting (albeit adding, the Korea based carmaker Kia into the Pearl Harbour mix), clearly shows how easily the arguments of the bureaucracy’s brave trade warriors dovetail with those of Stephen Harper and George W. Bush on broader “matters of state.”

But leaving aside Carlyle’s approving linkage of protectionist “Buy Canadian” or “Buy American” blandishments with imperialist military adventures, one has to ask, where has this staunch labour bureaucrat been for the past twenty years?

The globalization of the auto industry has ensured that there no longer is any such thing as an American car, a Canadian car—or a Japanese car, for that matter. Honda Accords are built by North American workers in Ohio and Ontario. The Toyota Corolla and the Pontiac Vibe are made in the same plant in Fremont, California—a joint venture with General Motors via the NUUMI agreements. And just to ensure wage benchmarking, similar models are made in Mexico just across the border in another NUUMI arrangement. Then there is the Nissan-GM Saturn plant in Tennessee. In Canada, General Motors and Suzuki operate a joint venture at the giant CAMI plant in Ingersoll, Ontario organized by the CAW. And of course, General Motors markets German-made Opels in Canada.

For decades the auto makers have utilized the globalized capitalist economy to whipsaw contracts, rationalize production and increase profits. Workers can only defend themselves if they break from the nationalist and pro-capitalist outlook of the CAW and the other unions and develop an international and socialist strategy in defence of jobs and living standards.



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