

Canada: CAW bureaucracy ends protest at GM headquarters

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Officials of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) union wrapped up their protest outside General Motors of Canada's national headquarters in Oshawa early Monday morning, abiding with a court order.

In a ruling issued last Friday, Ontario Superior Court Judge David Salmers had ordered the union to take down its "blockade" of the office building on the grounds that its continuation into a third-week would do irreparable harm to the auto maker.

The union had been demonstrating outside GM's headquarters since June 4th to protest the company's decision to close its truck plant in Oshawa in mid-2009, as part of a downsizing plan that will also see the axe fall on two GM truck and sport utility facilities in the United States and one in Mexico.

The 13-day protest action was an entirely meek and cynical affair. During the protest CAW officials quietly allowed white-collar workers to gain access to the office tower, if GM deemed them necessary to its operations. For its part, GM executives instructed their less essential staff to activate their business contingency plans and work from home or at backup facilities. Both company officials and union bureaucrats recognized the protest for what it was—an exercise by the CAW leadership to head off any potential militant response from the rank-and-file to the closure announcement by providing a high-profile, but nonetheless harmless, avenue for angry workers to blow off some steam.

That the closure protest had no intention of disrupting actual vehicle production was borne out at the court proceedings last Friday. GM, in their application for a court injunction against the protest, had claimed \$1.5 million in damages, noting in particular that a publicity stunt involving a slow moving convoy of automobiles driven by union members had on June 7th briefly delayed some "just-in-time" parts deliveries to the truck plant. Chris Buckley, president of CAW Local 222, who had stated on many occasions that the union would not disrupt GM production targets by any industrial action, anxiously told the judge that upon hearing of the parts-delivery delays, he had rushed to the plant gates to personally escort the delivery vehicles into the complex.

Judge Salmers declined, for the time being, to rule on the application for damages. Nor did he order an immediate lifting of the protest, instead providing the union about 60 hours to stand down their action. In his ruling Salmers observed that GM did not "come to court with clean hands," and that it had engaged in "almost deceitful behaviour" when it signed a contract with the union in mid-May with certain product line guarantees, only to withdraw them three weeks after the massive concessions contract was ratified by the membership.

The union was quick to hail Salmers' ruling as a vindication and is citing it to bolster its claim that the closure can be fought by appealing to the Ontario Labour Relations Board.

Yesterday, Dean Munger, GM's Executive Director of Labour Relations, arranged a meeting with CAW President Buzz Hargrove and Local 222 representatives to discuss how the union and management can return to a more regularized business relationship. Central to GM's

strategy is using the already ongoing discussions on new product lines for the Oshawa car plant as a means of pressing the CAW bureaucracy to quickly negotiate a close-out agreement for the truck plant.

GM is playing a cynical and dirty game to browbeat workers with the threat of losing their livelihoods. New models for the Oshawa car plant were already planned prior to the closure announcement for the truck facility, but now the company is once again suggesting the car plant's future is not secure.

CAW national president Buzz Hargrove has made much of the "betrayal" by GM executives. Earlier this spring Hargrove, secretly opened negotiations for new three-year deals with the Big Three auto makers in Canada. Behind the backs of the membership, the CAW negotiated a secret pattern agreement with Ford five months before the expiration of the contract and almost two months before the convening of the CAW's Collective Bargaining Convention that normally would set the union's objectives. That deal, which met considerable resistance amongst Ford workers, provided the auto maker with hundreds of millions of dollars of concessions.

Hargrove quickly followed up on the Ford pact, with similar deals with GM and Chrysler. These were rammed through by the bureaucracy in votes that were held, in some cases, less than 24 hours after the announcement of the tentative agreements. In addition to the agreed-upon concessions, GM and the CAW negotiated a close-out agreement for the Windsor, Ontario Transmission plant that will see the elimination of 1,400 jobs.

At the press conference convened to announce the agreements with GM and Chrysler, Hargrove said, "I'm immensely proud of the bargaining committees and the corporations. It's a win-win. I never thought like that before. I always thought of just winning for the membership." In fact, the only winners in the deal were the auto makers who won a wage freeze, cutbacks in jobs and benefits, and a clause that allows new hires to be paid up to 30 percent less than workers already on the payroll over a three year period.

At the ratification meetings for the GM contract, Hargrove claimed that the huge array of concessions granted to the company had "saved" jobs at the Oshawa complex, particularly at the truck plant that was soon to be reduced to one shift. But three weeks later, GM announced the truck plant closure, citing a standard clause within the collective agreement that allows them to alter product line allocations should market conditions change.

Hargrove and the CAW leadership have indicated that their likely next step will be to challenge GM's planned closure through the Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB), claiming GM violated the new contract's product guarantees. However, because of the market conditions "loophole" clause, the union has little chance of convincing the OLRB to order GM to rescind its closure decision. Hargrove admitted as much during his speech to last week's CAW Collective Bargaining Convention. Even if the OLRB did "overturn" the closure announcement, it would

merely be to order the company to go through the motions of consulting with the union before pushing through the closure, since anything else would constitute a violation of the proprietorial rights upheld by Canada's collective bargaining and legal systems.

Judge Salmers, in ruling in favour of GM's application for a court injunction, said he was of the opinion that GM had "breached" the recent contract by failing to consult with the union prior to the closure announcement. Should the CAW grieve this contract violation, the company could potentially receive a slap on the wrist in the form of a fine.

On the political front, the CAW leadership have mounted a right-wing nationalist appeal to the big business political parties that populate the Canadian parliament. Calling for "fair trade" policies (i.e. protectionist barriers), Hargrove is demanding that measures be taken to force foreign auto manufacturers to cut workers' jobs in the United States, Mexico, Europe and Asia in order to bring more jobs to Canada. Such calls only serve to further split auto workers across the globe and provide the auto companies with the ideological means to whipsaw concession contracts across national borders and to garner massive tax write-offs by playing national governments and political jurisdictions within nation-states off against each other.

The union's perspective serves to pit car workers in Canada against their brothers and sisters internationally, and results in a never-ending downward spiraling of conditions. In order to fight the global offensive of the auto makers, workers need to break from their pro-company unions, unite with their fellow workers around the world, and build new organs of struggle, based on an international program to reorganize economic and political life in the interests of working people, instead of the profits of the tiny corporate elite.

Workers should take stock of the wretched record of Hargrove and his lieutenants during this latest episode. First the CAW bureaucracy hailed the sell-out deals signed with the Big Three as the best they could do under tough market conditions. Jobs were saved, they claimed, in return for hundreds of millions of dollars in concessions. The pattern agreement had to be negotiated quickly and secretly, Hargrove added, because market conditions would deteriorate further by the autumn when the old contracts actually expired. If workers had little or no time to deliberate and discuss the new deals, well, that was the price to be paid for "getting the deal done".

Now, only weeks later, GM workers find themselves saddled with draconian give-backs to the company under conditions where 2,600 jobs will be lost in Oshawa on top of the 1,400 redundancies slated for the Windsor Transmission plant. Furthermore, hundreds of jobs are currently under threat at the St. Catharines engine plant, since it ships the lion's share of its product to the soon to be mothballed Oshawa truck facility. And hundreds more auto parts workers, also organized by the CAW, will see their jobs disappear in lockstep with the scheduled plant closures.

In the meantime, both Ford and Chrysler executives are watching the situation closely. They have already made it known to the union and the business press that they are considering following GM's example, and rethinking job commitments given in the new three year deals that they recently signed. Further job cuts at Chrysler's Brampton plant and Ford's St. Thomas facility have been mentioned as possibilities.

In the wake of this debacle, the union leadership has worked might and main to contain the growing anger amongst the rank-and-file from spilling over into wildcat actions and occupations. Their publicity stunt at GM headquarters was a grandstand play—a transparent attempt to convince the membership that the union leadership is not simply a patsy to the company.

In this regard, the corporate media played its own despicable role.

From the outset it was clear to any reporter who had eyes that the CAW and GM were performing a shadow dance. Throughout the 13 day "blockade" white collar employees were allowed to walk into work. By

the first Monday of the action, local union president Chris Buckley had announced that any staff that GM deemed critical to operations could drive into work. Less critical staff, meanwhile, continued to work from home or from a pre-arranged backup site. During the entire period, both Buckley and Hargrove made countless statements opposing strike action. When production briefly slowed during the Saturday June 7 car-convoy, Buckley personally intervened to assist GM. And when the court order came to dismantle the "blockade," it happened like clockwork and without mishap.

Yet the press and television broadcasters hyped the event as if it was no-holds-barred class warfare between the company and the union. Hourly on-the-spot reports were breathlessly given by concerned looking journalists. Clearly, both GM executives and their counterparts in the Canadian media establishment saw it as important to provide Hargrove and the rest of the CAW leadership with some sort of fig leaf with which to conceal their spinelessness and complicity.

As if to underline this, last Wednesday evening—Day 8 of the "blockade"—Buzz Hargrove was the guest of honour at perhaps the largest ever gathering of millionaires, big business politicians, and well heeled labour bureaucrats in Toronto's history. Not since the funeral of Louis Laberge, the one-time goon for the International Association of Machinist bureaucracy who rose to become the virtual president for life of the Quebec Federation of Labour, have so many pillars of the Canadian establishment turned out to honour a union leader.

The black-tie event was meant to honour Hargrove for his contributions to Eva's Initiatives, a Toronto charity that helps to get at-risk youth off the street. Over fine wines and gourmet delicacies, Buzz Hargrove, whom the media was touting as the scourge of the auto companies, was feted by the likes of Magna International boss Frank Stronach, anti-union book retailer Heather Reisman and her husband Gerry Schwartz from Onex Corporation. Amongst the political glitterati on the guest list were arch neo-conservatives Brian Mulroney, Ernie Eves, and Mike Harris. Workfare pioneer and former New Brunswick Premier Frank McKenna acted as co-chair at the festivities. Perhaps most telling of all was the presence—at the head-table no less—of Troy Clarke, vice-president of GM North America and Arturo Elias, president of GM Canada.



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