

Canada: GM seeks discussions with CAW to end Oshawa “blockade”

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As outrage continues to build amongst auto workers and the people of Oshawa, Ontario, over General Motors’ recent announcement of the impending closure of the giant Oshawa truck plant, the leadership of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) union is working with the company to dissipate workers’ anger.

Last week, CAW president Buzz Hargrove, Local 222 president Chris Buckley, and Oshawa Plant chairman Keith Osborne were caught off guard by GM’s announcement that 2,600 auto workers would lose their jobs in the second half of 2009 when the company ceases all truck production at the Oshawa complex.

Just two weeks earlier, the CAW officialdom had rammed through a new three-year contract that offered up massive concessions and accepted the imminent closure of GM’s Windsor Transmission plant in exchange for supposed job guarantees at other GM facilities—guarantees that Hargrove said would keep trucks rolling off the line in Oshawa through 2011 and beyond. But GM, citing the freshly-minted contract’s language, argued that market conditions had changed, thereby voiding future product commitments.

Hargrove, who had claimed that he had saved thousands of jobs by surrendering unprecedented concessions, was exposed as the purveyor of little more than bureaucratic snake oil. He has been reduced to claiming that the Oshawa truck plant closure is a violation of the contract, with GM countering that the new agreement doesn’t take force until mid-September and, in any event, allows GM complete freedom to slash jobs should market conditions deteriorate.

In an effort to shore up its rapidly evaporating credibility amongst the rank and file, the CAW leadership mounted a so-called “blockade” of GM’s national headquarters, also located in Oshawa, beginning last Wednesday. The office-building

blockade has been a rather tame affair. The union is not preventing white-collar personnel from walking into the building. On Monday, local president Buckley announced that he “made GM an offer to allow their payroll personnel in and anyone else they deemed essential to run their Canadian operations”.

For its part, GM has made it known from Day One that it has instructed its white collar staff to activate, wherever possible, its backup and work-at-home contingencies, whilst the company and the union work to resolve the situation. Even when GM began to prepare the groundwork for a court injunction against the protest on Monday, a company spokesman offered to seek a “collaborative” approach with the union to bring the action to a close.

With many workers still skeptical about the efficacy of the “blockade,” Buckley organized a three hour go-slow car convoy around the truck and car complex on Saturday that, according to plant chairman Keith Osborne, slowed production for about 45 minutes by delaying supply deliveries.

Hargrove, Buckley, and the company are clearly working together to ensure that the situation does not get out of hand. The bureaucracy well knows there have been rank-and-file discussions of a wildcat strike, as does GM. On Tuesday, at the CAW’s Collective Bargaining and Political Action Convention in Toronto, delegates, speaking from the floor, warned of the anger amongst rank-and-file workers and politely asked the leadership to at least consider a one-day strike. From the podium, a stoic Hargrove declined comment.

Local president Chris Buckley has been quick to reassure management that the CAW officialdom has no intention of interrupting production at either the truck plant or the adjacent car-assembly facility. “I am encouraging my members to remain on their jobs,” he

said at the beginning of the dispute. “I want my members to continue to build the best trucks and cars in the industry.” Clearly signaling his intentions to the company—that is, to provide a harmless avenue to blow off the steam building among auto workers—Buckley continued, “The membership is looking for the union to take some action. That’s clearly what we’ve done”.

On Monday, Hargrove stated that he was not surprised that the auto maker was moving toward an injunction and tipped his hat to their patience: “It’s quite interesting that they recognized that the anger and frustration was pretty high and they better let it set for a few days before they applied [for an injunction]. I’m glad they let it set for a few days.”

Ever cognisant of its primary role as guardian of company productivity targets and hence corporate profits, the CAW bureaucracy’s “fight back” has been one part bluster, one part publicity stunt and two parts virulent anti-American and anti-Mexican chauvinism.

From the outset, Hargrove has been at pains to assure GM and its investors on Wall Street and Bay Street that whatever stunts the union may have to pull to quell the anger of the rank and file, a strike against GM’s flagrant and cynical manoeuvre to close the truck plant is not in the cards. “What’s the best approach?” asked Hargrove. “Is it through the grievance procedure? Expedited arbitration, which we have done under our contract? Is it the Ontario Labour Relations Board, or is it the courts? We’ll decide which place we can be most effective and get a decision the quickest before this thing starts to wind down”.

Of course, Hargrove, as a veteran labour bureaucrat, knows full well that there is absolutely no possibility that such appeals will result in a reprieve for the truck plant. And just to ensure his compliancy, GM has yet to announce the anticipated additional product for the car plant that sits next to the soon-to-be-closed truck facility.

Hargrove set the tone for his damage control operation from the beginning of the dispute, launching into a Canadian nationalist tirade, saying, “This is an American company, controlled by Americans, and they are making decisions in tough times to protect American jobs,” ignoring the thousands of US workers who are being thrown onto the street. He also denounced Mexican workers because GM has decided to build hybrid pick-ups there, instead of in Canada.

Never mentioned once is the fact that two of the four truck and sport utility plants being closed by GM are in the United States and one is in Mexico. CAW officials have derisively referred to the Mexican facility slated for closure as a small, “shed” operation.

The CAW’s “fightback” campaign gives pride of place to claims that the Oshawa facility is one of the company’s most profitable, that is to say it aimed at convincing GM that cutting US and Mexican jobs, in preference to Canadian ones, would be better for its shareholders.

Ken Lewenza, Local 444 president at Chrysler’s Windsor operation, and touted as a possible heir apparent to Hargrove, magnanimously strode to the microphone Tuesday at the Bargaining Convention and offered all delegates a “Made in Canada Matters” T-shirt worn by the members of the local bureaucracy at the “blockade”. The offer came on the heels of an emergency resolution proposed by Hargrove and passed by the delegates that called on the federal government to require auto makers to produce in Canada a total amount of cars and light trucks equivalent to the number of vehicles that they sell in Canada. A second resolution called on municipal councils to adopt a “Buy Canadian” policy in matters of government procurement.

Given the right-wing nationalist perspective that has animated the CAW’s blockade, it is not surprising that both federal Liberal leader Stephane Dion and Jack Layton, leader of the social-democratic New Democratic Party, have visited it to show support.

Hargrove stumped for the re-election of a Liberal minority government in the 2006 federal election, making campaign appearances with the then Liberal prime minister, Paul Martin, and Liberal MP Belinda Stronach, the daughter of Frank Stronach, the principal shareholder of auto parts giant Magna International.



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