GM closes plants in Wisconsin and Ohio

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24 December 2008

This is a bitter Christmas for thousands of General Motors workers and their families in Wisconsin and Ohio whose plants are permanently closing. Tens of thousands more fear they will share the same fate as the Detroit automaker extends the holiday shutdown period and begins to implement the drastic cost-cutting mandated by the federal government as part of the bailout.

Tuesday was the last day of work for 2,200 workers at the Janesville, Wisconsin plant and for 1,100 workers at the Moraine, Ohio factory near Dayton. Both plants assemble SUVs and pick-up truck models whose production has been drastically reduced in the face of plummeting sales and the near bankruptcy of the Detroit automaker.

The plants were vital to the economy of the two towns and the closings will have devastating social consequences. Manufacturers that supply parts to the factories are also closing and the layoffs will undermine local tax revenues and hit restaurants, retailers and other businesses dependent on the paychecks of autoworkers.

Last June, GM said it would close the plants, along with two other light truck factories in Oshawa, Ontario and Toluca, Mexico, by 2010. It then moved up the closing dates for the Janesville and Moraine plants to December 23 and announced that Oshawa, with 2,600 jobs, would close by May 2009.

Two other plants, including a metal stamping plant in Wyoming, Michigan, near Grand Rapids, with 1,500 workers, and a transmission plant across the Detroit River in Windsor, Ontario, with 1,400 jobs, are to be closed in December 2009 and in 2010 respectively.

However, this is just the beginning. In addition to outlining sharp reductions in autoworkers' pay and benefits in exchange for some $13 billion in federal assistance, GM has outlined plans to eliminate another 31,500 jobs and close at least a dozen more plants.

The Moraine plant, which once employed 5,000 workers, produced the Chevrolet Trailblazer, GMC Envoy, as well as Saab SUVs. About 500 workers showed up for the last shift of work on Tuesday. Arriving before dawn, the *Dayton Daily News* reported them 'occasionally honking their horns at one another or at a cluster of local and international media gathered next to the Kettering-Moraine Museum, which overlooks the plant.'

The GM plant's body shop and paint shop operations, which occur earlier in the production process at Moraine, were wrapped up prior to Tuesday's shutdown of assembly work there, a company spokesman said. The plant's second shift—with more than 1,000 workers—was eliminated last summer.

The plant closing is the latest blow to the Dayton area, which had once been a major hub of auto and auto parts production for GM, with a long history of militant struggles by autoworkers. In recent years, downsizing by GM has resulted in the elimination of 3,000 jobs at Delphi. The closing of the Moraine plant will lead to the loss of thousands of jobs at supplier plants whose only customer is GM.

The last 64 workers out of a workforce of 200 also lost their jobs with the closure of supplier Jamestown Moraine. 'I've got the house I've got to pay for. I've got the car payment, I've got clothes and I've got to give the dog a little food—and you throw in kids? It's bad for everybody,' Tony Murphy, a foreman who operates a forklift, told CNN.

'It's going to be a big ripple effect on everyone,' he said, 'because when they first closed the first two shifts down, it was devastating then, but this, right here, will seal the nail on the coffin.

'Not only is it going to affect where I work, it's going to affect retail. It's going to affect the mom-and-pop shops. It's even going to affect people all the way up in Michigan because they bring those parts that are sent

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over there to GM,' he said.

Moraine, a former Frigidaire appliance factory, is the only GM plant in the United States represented by a union other than the United Auto Workers. Its workers, along with its suppliers' workers, belong to the electrical union, the IUE-CWA.

The massive Janesville assembly plant also produced its last vehicle Tuesday. The 4.8 million-square-foot facility began as a tractor assembly plant in 1919 and has been at the center of the Wisconsin town, 100 miles northwest of Chicago, and one of a series of manufacturing centers in the area, including Rockford and Belvidere, Illinois and Beloit, Wisconsin.

Altogether, the cuts of both shifts and the end of GM production have eliminated nearly 2,200 GM jobs and at least 1,150 jobs at supplier companies in Janesville. Lear Corporation, LSI and Flint Special Services are closing their local plants, laying of 371, 159, and 28 workers respectively. Allied Automotive Group is laying off 117; Woodbridge Group, another 70 workers. The Alcoa Wheel Plant in Beloit also announced plans to close in June, laying off 240.

Tom Purnell, a 48-year-old single father, was laid off from Lear Corp. in June after nearly 14 years when General Motors ended its second shift in Janesville. 'I can't find a job,' Purnell told the *Janesville Gazette*. 'Places now aren't even taking applications anymore.'

Purnell, who will only be eligible for the standard 26 weeks of state unemployment benefits—with a maximum of $355 a week—said he was thinking about going back to school and getting 'something in the mechanic field.' He lost his health insurance in October, and he worries about paying his bills and keeping the home he and his 10-year-old son share.

After GM announced the closing of the Janesville plant in June, UAW Local 95 forced autoworkers to accept a concessions contract, claiming it might save the plant.

As the last Chevy Tahoe rolled down the line at 7 a.m. Tuesday, UAW Local 95 Shop Chair John Dohner Jr. told several hundred workers gathered to watch, 'We didn't deserve this. We put hard work into it. Everything the union leadership told the membership we needed to do, we have done. They are taking our local agreement and toting it in front of other plants, saying, ‘You have to do this if you want to be around.' But the good thing is that those other plants, those other locals are saying, ‘You didn't do anything for Janesville, so why should we do anything for you."

The closing of these plants—and the social catastrophe it is producing for workers, their families and their communities—underscores the failure of the long-held policy of the UAW of labor-management 'partnership' and concessions, which began with the 1980 Chrysler bailout and continues to this day. Far from defending jobs, the UAW promoted a bidding war between workers in different locations, with a never-ending race to see who would work for the worst conditions and the lowest wages. During this time scores of factories have been closed and more than 600,000 Big Three jobs lost.

Once again, the UAW is collaborating with the government and the auto bosses to blackmail workers into accepting a historic rollback in wages, living standards and working conditions as part of the auto industry bailout. The concessions wrenched from workers will not be used to ensure the long-term health of the industry and the jobs of autoworkers, but to provide lucrative returns for the corporate executives and biggest investors.

Autoworkers should reject the demand for concessions and organize a struggle, independently of the UAW, based on a new strategy. This means breaking with the two parties of big business and advancing a socialist solution to the economic crisis, including the nationalization of the auto industry under the democratic control of working people.

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