

Auto parts workers occupy closed plant in Windsor, Canada

CAW moves to block broader struggle against layoffs

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Hundreds of workers rallied yesterday in front of a Windsor, Ontario auto parts plant, which autoworkers have been occupying since Tuesday night. Workers at the Aradco factory seized control of the plant a week after its parent company, Catalina Precision Products, shut it down, throwing 90 workers out of their jobs without severance and vacation pay and other benefits.

The action followed several days of mass picketing by workers to block Chrysler—which accounts for 99 percent of the auto supplier’s business—from removing parts and tooling from this factory and a sister plant known as Aramco. The Detroit-based automaker cancelled its contracts with Catalina after a dispute over payments, and immediately obtained a court order to retrieve parts and tooling equipment from the supplier.

On Tuesday, more than 100 auto workers from the two factories and surrounding auto plants defied a court injunction and continued to blockade the factory, stopping a flatbed truck and Chrysler security vehicles from entering the facility. Then, shortly before 6 PM Tuesday, a small group of rank-and-file workers gained entry to the plant, which stamps metal for the bodies and chassis of Chrysler vehicles, and appeared on the roof of the building. They welded the doors shut and said that they would not leave until they received \$1.7 million in termination and severance pay, which they are due under Ontario law.

A dozen policemen—who were brought to the scene by the factory’s alarm system—were prevented from entering by scores of workers who had gathered outside to defend the occupation.

Chrysler had attempted to end the blockade Monday by offering to provide workers \$205,000 towards the monies owed them by Aradco. However, workers rejected the offer by a 64 percent margin, even though their union, the Canadian Auto Workers, said it was the best deal they could get. Workers who took over the plant said they had no choice but to take hold of the company’s assets because otherwise they could be cheated out of the benefits to which they were legally entitled. If the corporation declared bankruptcy, the banks and other secured creditors would have first claim on the company’s assets.

The struggle has generated widespread support among workers throughout Windsor, a hard-hit industrial city of 220,000 people, just across the river from Detroit. The rally on Wednesday brought out around 500 workers, including workers from the nearby Chrysler mini-plant, which is threatened with closure.

Last week Chrysler President Tom LaSorda threatened to close all

of the company’s manufacturing plants in Canada unless autoworkers accept a 25 percent reduction in wages and benefits and the Canadian and Ontario governments provide the company with a US\$2-3 billion loan. Chrysler employs 9,400 people at its assembly plants in Windsor and Brampton, Ontario, a parts plant and Canadian headquarters. Tens of thousands of parts workers and others also face losing their jobs if the company carries out its threat to end Canadian operations.

In the face of these threats the CAW has proved thoroughly impotent. Opposing any unified struggle by Canadian and US workers against the destruction of jobs on both sides of the border, the CAW has pledged to match or surpass any concessions granted by the United Auto Workers in the US, in order to maintain the “competitive advantage” for automakers doing business in Canada. The UAW has already reduced wages and benefits to the level of non-union workers at US plants owned by Toyota and other international companies.

The CAW last week reopened its contract with General Motors to impose major concessions, but Chrysler is seeking more than double the hourly cost savings granted to GM. Ford has also said it wants greater concessions than those given GM. The CAW is currently engaged in negotiations with Chrysler, with CAW President Ken Lewenza saying, “We are emphatically arguing that the GM deal will meet Chrysler’s needs.”

The occupation by the parts workers in Windsor has clearly shaken both Chrysler and the CAW bureaucracy, who fear such an example could inspire autoworkers across Canada to follow suit. Chrysler officials quickly denounced the occupation, hypocritically expressing concern for thousands of Chrysler workers who they said would be laid off due to a shortage of parts. “Absolutely, it will shut down Chrysler plants across North America, put their brothers and sisters out of work and potentially shut down other suppliers,” said company spokesman Dave Elshoff.

The CAW called Wednesday’s rally to provide a cover for its efforts to wrap up the struggle and prevent the eruption of a movement beyond its control. Several speakers, including CAW President Ken Lewenza, sought to promote illusions that the Ontario legislature could be pressured to protect workers, not corporations. Lewenza appealed to the politicians from the Liberals and New Democratic Party to provide guaranteed benefits to workers losing their jobs, so that “there will never be a closure where workers have to occupy the plant and take the threats of the police” to collect severance pay.

He made it clear that the intransigence of the auto companies was threatening the “mood of cooperation” with the corporations. “We want to work with you, but don’t crap on us,” he said.

While Lewenza made some pseudo-militant noises in front of the crowd—saying that workers were not responsible for the global economic crisis and should not pay for it—in front of news reporters, the CAW president made it clear he was interested in shutting down the struggle as soon as possible.

“We hate to do this. It looks illegal or it is illegal under the injunction,” he told reporters. “The last thing we want to do is close Chrysler and make the company lose revenue. This is bad timing when the survival of Chrysler, GM and Ford are at stake.”

When this reporter asked Lewenza why the union was conducting no fight to stop the mass layoffs affecting workers throughout the auto industry, the union president expressed his prostration before the profit system, saying, “Our union can’t control the market economy. That’s where you need government to step in.”

The various politicians from the New Democratic Party that were paraded before the workers made it clear that they are no less defenders of the market system. Paul Miller, a member of the provincial parliament from the depressed steel town of Hamilton, made a nationalist rant, saying the erosion of the country’s industrial base was due to the fact that Canadians “had lost control” of their industries to “foreign-owned corporations.” He said he was pushing for legislation that would mandate 50 percent Canadian ownership over all companies, making the preposterous claim that Canadian bosses would protect the jobs of workers better.

At the conclusion of the rally, Lewenza announced that the CAW had reached an agreement with the company. “It provides some support—not all the support—for our members. But compared to Monday we’ve gone a long way.” Officials said workers would have a chance to vote on the deal at a meeting of their unit of CAW Local 195 Thursday morning.

If the company and Chrysler were forced to retreat at all, it was because of the determined struggle of the workers themselves, not the CAW, which, despite its large membership and vast financial resources, did nothing but seek to smother the struggle.

In contrast to the CAW officials, rank-and-file workers expressed their determination to stand up and defend their jobs. One of the workers involved in the occupation, Frank Kelly, told the *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS), “I left the plant but I wanted to take a stand with my brothers so they could get the same severance package that I got in July.

“We went in late last night (Tuesday). It was done by the rank-and-file independently from the union. We didn’t do this just for ourselves. We did it for those who are unemployed, for everybody that is getting screwed by the big companies in every city across Canada and elsewhere.”

Louis, a worker with 16 years at the plant, said, “We were surprised last Monday when we got called after dinner and were told not to come in the next day. We asked how many were being laid off and they said the whole company.

“The next day we came to the plant and there was nobody from the company. We heard that Chrysler was coming to take their tools. We said it was unbelievable that they would come and take away the equipment in order to send it to another plant. We decided to stop the trucks. Some guys here have 28 years in the plant and they treat us like we have no rights. We’re laid off with no severance or vacation pay. We didn’t even get our last paycheck until the union negotiated for it. They haven’t given us our separation papers, which we need to get unemployment benefits.

“What is happening here is going on everywhere. We’re linked up

and part of the same crisis. This is a message from the workers and this type of thing is going to happen more and more. We have to fight to stop them from taking our jobs and hurting our families.”

Another worker involved in the struggle, Jagdish, referred to the occupation of the Republic Windows and Doors factory in Chicago last December. “Those workers were fighting for the same thing. Two hundred people stood up and won severance pay.”

A worker with 32 years at a Windsor area auto parts plant said, “The corporations just want to leave. They don’t care about the workers. They just take their money and put it in off-shore banks. It’s not fair to workers in Canada, the US or anywhere else. They have no respect for working people who have families and who work hard to get ahead. We give them concessions to help them out and they just ask for more.”

The WSWS also spoke with two workers from Chrysler’s assembly plant, Ken Fuerth and Tim MacDonald. Tim said, “It is a common fight for workers in the US and Canada. The Windsor Assembly plant is the next to close. I’m going to be one of the 1,200 who go out the door on June 24. I think they are going for a trade war and that won’t help any of us.”

Ken added, “The auto union should never have split up between the UAW and CAW. We’re competing against each other, fighting for jobs and in a race to the bottom, while the corporations are laughing all the way to the bank.

“They’re threatening to take our jobs and shift them to St. Louis, where they closed the plant. If they shut down the assembly plant there will be nothing left in Windsor. These workers who locked themselves in are taking a stand. Maybe it’s time for some civil unrest, even if it means going to jail.

“These corporate executives don’t care. Look at Tom LaSorda, he got a \$15 million bonus, on top of the \$30 million he made. Then there are the underlings who take from us—the ones whose sweat and blood makes the cars.”



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