

Unifor bows to latest GM Canada layoffs

Carl Bronski
9 May 2015

General Motors (GM) announced late last month that it will end production of the Chevrolet Camaro sports car at its Oshawa, Ontario, assembly plant this November, axing 1,000 more jobs from its operations in that city.

Production of the Camaro will be moved to GM's assembly facility in Lansing, Michigan. The downsizing in Oshawa will reduce GM's total production workforce in the city that has historically been the center of GM Canada to just 2,600. As late as 2007, there were over 10,000 autoworkers employed by GM in Oshawa.

The reduction of three shifts to two at the "flex" assembly plant as a result of the relocation of Camaro production is clearly part of a drive to extort further massive concessions from GM's Canadian workforce. No new product lines have been announced for either of the two Oshawa plants after 2016, which threatens the jobs of many of the remaining workers. And GM has said it will determine its future plans for the Oshawa plants only after the 2016 contract negotiations.

GM's plans to end the Camaro line have long been known by the workers and the Unifor union officialdom that purports to represent them. But rather than mobilize auto workers in a militant fight against the destruction of yet more auto jobs, the union, along with the Ontario Liberal government, have spent the past two years imploring their "partners" at GM for a model to replace the lost production.

Terms of the 2009 \$10.8 billion federal and Ontario government bailout of GM and Chrysler stipulated that the companies meet loose domestic production quotas until 2016. With the imminent expiration of that agreement, more production previously located in Canada is expected to move to Mexico and the United States.

For decades now, the unions have responded to the efforts of the automakers and other transnationals to pit workers against each other in a race to the bottom by promoting rabid nationalism and imposing concessions. Unifor (the former Canadian Auto Workers union, or CAW), like the US-based United Auto Workers (UAW), has joined with management time and again in demanding

workers make their own particular plants more "competitive," i.e. accept speed-up and job, wage and benefit cuts.

Indeed the birth of the CAW in 1985 sprang directly from the promulgation of a nationalist program that divided North American workers and gave a huge opening for the Big Three auto companies to begin their practice of "whip-sawing" contracts and jobs back and forth across the Canada-US border.

Unifor's refusal to lift a finger to fight the Oshawa job cuts should come as no surprise to the thousands of Unifor members who have lost their jobs as a result of plant closures and down-sizing. In a watershed dispute in 2012, the CAW refused to mobilize its extensive province-wide membership in strike action against the closure of the giant Caterpillar plant in London, Ontario, and urged workers there to accept severance packages.

In 2010, the last GM plant closed in Windsor, Ontario. When the announcement of the closure was made in 2008, then union head Buzz Hargrove blustered about strike action to an angry membership whilst quietly moving into discussions with the company for an "orderly shutdown."

When auto parts plants throughout southern Ontario were closed in the wake of the 2008-2009 economic crisis, CAW officials played an active role in disbanding several plant occupations launched by militant workers. And GM workers in Oshawa will remember the antics of the CAW leadership in 2008 at the soon to be moth-balled truck plant. As workers marched through the city seething with outrage, CAW president Buzz Hargrove counselled against action on the shop floor, instead diverting the anger of the membership into a short-lived photo-op "blockade" of GM headquarters.

What has been the union's response to the threat of unemployment that now hangs over the heads of their remaining Oshawa membership?

First, Unifor president Jerry Dias and Oshawa Local 222 chief Ron Svajlenko have made it clear that no fight will be undertaken to defend jobs. Instead, they have touted the fact that 2,100 out of the current 3,600-strong

Oshawa workforce are eligible for retirement. This comes as little solace to the many workers who may still face the axe, as it is not yet clear how many employees will accept a pensioning-off under conditions where early-retirement would significantly reduce their annual income.

Secondly, the temporary preponderance of veteran workers in the plant is cynically viewed as something of a boon by the union bureaucracy. With over 2,000 workers eligible to take retirement, Unifor has been anxious to point out to management that in the event of a mass exodus from the plants by veteran workers, GM will be able to reap benefits from a two-tier contract system already in operation in the Detroit Three auto plants, under which new hires and workers with low seniority are paid far less in wages and benefits than older workers.

As Dias excitedly told reporters, “If those workers retire, they can be replaced by newly-hired employees who start at \$20.50 per hour and whose wages won’t rise to the full seniority level of \$34 an hour until they have been there for 10 years.”

In a bid to prepare the ground for further concessions to the auto bosses in the 2016 contract negotiations, several Unifor officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, told the *Globe and Mail* that ending a “hybrid” pension program for all hourly-paid new hires would be the best way to convince GM to invest in its facilities in Oshawa and St. Catharines, Ontario. Should this concession, which would put an end to even a semblance of a guaranteed “defined” annual pension payment, be granted to GM, it is all but certain Unifor would accept that a similar provision be included in the upcoming contracts with Ford and Fiat-Chrysler.

The pro-company stance the union takes in the auto plants dovetails with its pro-big business political perspective. The CAW/Unifor has developed intimate ties with the Liberal Party, the Canadian ruling class’s preferred party of government for most of the 20th century. In the 2006 federal election, then-CAW President Buzz Hargrove campaigned for Paul Martin, who as finance minister had imposed the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history. In 2011, then-CAW President Ken Lewenza campaigned alongside the Ontario Liberals, extolling their role in the 2009 bailout of the auto bosses.

Dias has taken up where his former colleagues left off. He stumped in last June’s provincial election for an Ontario Liberal government that, with the backing of the trade union-supported New Democratic Party, has imposed sweeping social spending cuts. In 2015, Unifor has declared its central objective to be the electoral defeat

of Stephen Harper and his federal Conservative government. Toward this end, Unifor will support sitting New Democratic Party Members of Parliament, while backing Liberal candidates in the lion’s share of the other 240 constituencies.

Only last week, Dias extolled a speech made by federal Liberal Party leader Justin Trudeau at a meeting of the International Association of Fire Fighters. Trudeau, who leads a party with a record of austerity and militarism similar to that of the Conservatives, values the unions for their role in containing and smothering workers’ struggles and, therefore, takes exception to some of Harper’s union-baiting.

No doubt straining the credulity of hundreds of thousands of workers who have seen their wages, working conditions and jobs cut by Conservative, Liberal and New Democratic Party governments, Trudeau lavished praise on the pro-company unions as “one of the few remaining forces that fight effectively for the fair wages that Canada’s middle class needs to make the economy grow.”

Trudeau’s remarks left Dias ecstatic. “We will be absolutely supporting the Liberals in key ridings, no question about it,” he gushed. “What the Liberals need to do—and, by the sounds of it, what they have just done—is they need to show a strong support for the labour movement in Canada.”

Fewer and fewer workers are fooled today by the bluster of their erstwhile union leaders. But to find a way forward, workers must break politically and organizationally from the unions and the New Democratic Party and Liberals and build new organs of class struggle—above all a mass workers party committed to resolving the capitalist crisis at the expense of big business through the socialist reorganization of socioeconomic life.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact