

GM Canada slashes CAMI workforce in Ontario

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General Motors Canada announced last week that 625 autoworkers at its CAMI assembly plant in Ingersoll, Ontario would be laid off at the end of July as the company shifts production of the GMC Terrain to Mexico and as, according to the company, sales slow for the current Equinox model assembled at CAMI. The move reduces the labour force at the operation to less than 2,400 workers.

The announcement comes on the heels of significant reductions in the GM labour force at three American-based assembly facilities. Twelve hundred workers at Lordstown, Ohio lost their jobs last week. In addition, the company announced that 800 jobs would be cut in Lansing, Michigan with a further 1,300 job losses slated in March at its Detroit-Hamtramck assembly plant.

In a statement issued by Unifor, the Canadian auto union, President Jerry Dias characterized GM's announcement as a 'betrayal.'

"This decision reeks of corporate greed. It is not based on sales, it is another example of how good jobs are being shifted out of Canada for cheaper labour in Mexico and Unifor will not let it happen without a fight," proclaimed Dias.

There is no doubt that GM—which has posted profits hand-over-fist since the auto bailouts of 2009—operates as a trans-national entity that seeks to maximize its returns on the backs of its highly exploited labour force. But Dias' talk of "betrayal" is particularly rich.

Unifor constantly refers to the auto bosses as their "partners" and has rammed one concessions deal after another down the throats of its membership for over a decade.

The announcement of layoffs exposes the bankruptcy of the claims made by Unifor and Dias that concessions

would protect jobs. Dias spent the past year touting the claim that his strategy of concession bargaining would secure the Detroit Three's "footprint" in Canada. In the face of unprecedented rank-and-file opposition to the massive concessions contracts pushed through at GM, Ford and Fiat-Chrysler this past fall, the Unifor leadership insisted that surrendering even the semblance of a defined benefit pension for new hires, cementing the hated ten-year two tier grow-in period, cutting benefits and providing a wage rise so small that it fails to keep up with inflation were all necessary to safeguard employment levels in Canada.

It was at the CAMI plant in 2013 that Unifor first agreed with GM to abolish defined-benefit pensions for new hires, setting the stage for similar concessions across-the-board when negotiations opened at the Detroit Three's other Canadian plants in the summer of 2016. CAMI, which negotiates its contract one year after all other Canadian plants, acts as something of a stalking horse to herald future cuts to workers' living standards. It is no surprise that the current layoffs, slated for July, come the same month that contract negotiations open for the Ingersoll workers.

GM's announcement also casts a further shadow over the future of the company's Oshawa facility. With no new products assigned and threatened with closure by 2019, the Oshawa plant was buttressed by overflow shipments of Equinox frames. That practice will soon end. Company officials have so far stated that the change will not affect employment levels in Oshawa.

However, the continued "re-positioning" of GM's global auto footprint will only lead to calls for deeper concessions from Oshawa workers. Dias' much criticized "framework agreement" signed with GM last September—an agreement that still has not provided important details on future product

timetables—claimed that to keep at least a portion of Oshawa operations running, overflow work would be shipped to the plant from a Missouri facility already operating at full capacity. However, with auto sales projected to decline over the next several years, Dias’ so-called “historic” 2016 deal with GM appears ready to unravel.

Unifor has stated that the union will not accept the CAMI layoffs “without a fight.” But the fact of the matter is that union officials have already sat down with the company to begin discussions on layoff protocols and severance packages.

Dias claimed that “the CAMI announcement is a shining example of everything wrong with NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement), it must be renegotiated. It is imperative that we have trade rules that help ensure good jobs in Canada.” He also called on the federal and provincial governments to “step up” their financial support for the auto companies in Canada.

Unifor, like the United Auto Workers south of the border, promotes a nationalist-corporatist course as the solution to continuing job losses in the auto industry. But this course has produced only one reversal after another over the past three decades. For years the auto bosses have taken advantage of the 1985 split between American and Canadian autoworkers to whipsaw jobs and wages back and forth across the border, giving product to the jurisdiction that is able to offer the most miserable contracts.

The right-wing, anti-working-class character of such politics is shown by the unions’ embrace of the Trump administration’s call for the renegotiation of NAFTA, which is part of a reactionary program of economic nationalism that leads directly to trade wars and military conflict.

Unifor’s appeal to the federal and Ontario Liberal governments is no less revealing. The last major infusion of cash by government into the coffers of the auto giants was accompanied by an unprecedented assault on workers’ wages, benefits and working conditions as part of the so-called bailout of the auto industry in 2008-09.

Unifor has developed an intimate alliance with Justin Trudeau’s big business Liberals, based on contract concessions, support for a low Canadian dollar that only serves to jack up consumer prices and reduce workers’ real wages, and the continued imposition of

social spending cuts and other measures to boost the insatiable profit drive of big business on the backs of the working class.

The only way workers at CAMI can fight back against the latest wave of job cuts is by appealing to autoworkers at GM facilities and at the other automakers throughout North America for support. All autoworkers confront the ever-present threat of layoffs and concessions, imposed with the full collaboration of the trade union bureaucracies that falsely claim to represent them.

Autoworkers’ interests can only be defended in a political and organizational break from Unifor and the UAW in the US. Independent action committees must be formed at CAMI and other plants to fight for the right to a decent-paying, secure job, an overturning of all concessions imposed by Unifor and the struggle for a workers’ government committed to utilizing the vast profits extracted by the auto giants through the exploitation of workers for social need, not the enrichment of a tiny minority.



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