

“The union works against us”

With contract battle looming, Canadian autoworkers at GM CAMI plant speak out

Carl Bronski
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Discontent among rank-and-file autoworkers is growing at the massive General Motors assembly plant in Ingersoll, Ontario, in the wake of GM’s announcement last month that 625 of the factory’s roughly 2,600 hourly workers will lose their jobs in July. The job cuts were a shot across the bow for workers who face a contract struggle in the summer, and who are determined to recoup lost wages and other concessions accepted by the auto union Unifor.

The factory, 156 km southwest of Toronto, opened in 1989 as a joint venture between GM and Japan-based Suzuki Motor Corporation, and was originally operated under the name Canadian Automotive Manufacturing, Inc. (CAMI). GM took full control of the plant in 2009 when Suzuki withdrew, and expanded the plant in 2016 after it received a half a billion dollars in government tax breaks and other incentives.

Unifor and its predecessor, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) union, have long negotiated a separate contract at the CAMI plant, which has been used as a laboratory by GM and the unions for various corporatist schemes and to set a new, lower benchmark to drive down labor costs at other factories. Workers at the plant currently produce the Chevrolet Equinox and GMC Terrain midsize sports utility vehicles at the plant.

Over the past month, an increasing number of CAMI workers have subscribed to the WSWs *Autoworker Newsletter* and begun distributing the newsletter in plant lunch and break areas. The newsletter and its call for the setting up of rank-and-file committees in opposition to the corporate-controlled Unifor won widespread support among the 23,000 GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler workers during last year’s contract struggle in Canada. In 2015, the newsletter was the center of opposition against the sellout agreement imposed by the United Auto Workers on 140,000 Detroit Three autoworkers in the United States.

In late February, a lead editorial in Unifor’s plant newsletter, *Off the Line*, warned workers only to believe information dispensed by the union officialdom, saying, “[T]he leadership are the ones with the proper information.” In a statement expressing fear over the growing influence of the WSWs *Autoworker Newsletter*, Local 88 Recording Secretary Doris

Weir said as the jobs cuts approached, “[Y]ou will start seeing more and more articles about our plant. Some of them are blatantly misleading, and nothing more than union bashing, even the ones that masquerade as being left-wing or socialist.”

Unifor and the CAW have presided over more than a decade of plant closures, mass layoffs and concessions, including the setting up of multi-tier wage schemes. In 2013, the deal the union negotiated at CAMI set the precedent for the auto companies to dismantle the last remnants of a defined benefit pension program throughout auto plants across the country.

Just like the company, Unifor is using the job cuts to demand even deeper concessions based on the bogus claim that this will “save” jobs. In the union’s current newsletter, plant chairman Mike Van Boekel wrote, “Let me be clear, we are not going to put ourselves on a pedestal and price ourselves out of jobs, and people need to look at the big picture.” This strategy, says Van Boekel, “will keep our plant in a very good position to retain new work and ensure job security for years to come.”

Surrendering wages, benefits, pensions and work rules has never prevented layoffs in Canada or anywhere else. Despite the give-backs, GM repeatedly laid off workers at CAMI, in 2001, 2003, 2006-2009, and now in 2017. As in the US, Europe and Japan, the unions are facilitating the slashing of jobs by increasing the number of temporary workers and ridding the plants of older, better-paid workers through “voluntary” retirement schemes.

On March 3, the local union released a leaflet announcing that any eligible worker who might wish to retire before the layoffs take effect will receive the standard, not an enhanced, buyout of C\$50,000 plus a partial car purchase allowance. With a two-tier workforce firmly in place, these retirements mean an increase in the percentage of workers trapped in various “grow-in” pay scales that require workers to labor for a decade before they reach top pay.

Underscoring its role as an enforcer of speed-up and labor discipline for management, the Unifor leaflet concludes, “Now is the time to keep our heads on straight and think of the bigger picture. We need everyone in the plant to continue working toward a successful (new model) launch.”

“That leaflet just says shut up and don’t complain,” Jim, a veteran of several plants in the auto industry told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*. “They want us to eat anything the company demands. The union’s worried. They are warning us about you guys. But we like your stuff. The team leaders and Unifor committee guys see your material lying around in the plant and they go around telling us that you’re union busters. I said to one of them, ‘Union busters? Hell, the whole union’s rotten right through. Bust it? No, we should be blowing it up sky-high. It’s good for nothing.’ I’m for workers sticking together and being organized like in the rank-and-file committees you call for, but Unifor is for the company, not for us.”

Another worker, Sue, agreed. “The union works against us. They try to convince us we should feel lucky just to have a job and that we’re greedy if we want better wages and working conditions. The only input they want from us is to keep the assembly lines rolling. But if you have a complaint, nobody bothers filing a grievance anymore. If you ask, the committeemen just shrug and say they don’t know about your grievance. Both the company and the union are happier putting everything through this ‘Problem Solver Program.’ If you have a complaint about safety or speed-up or bad equipment, they don’t want any paper trail. ‘Just talk to your team leader verbally,’ they say. Your committeeperson doesn’t want to get involved. So, you end up either shutting up or fighting with your boss as a lone individual, which you’re not supposed to do. When it’s all over, nothing changes.”

Jim added, “They want everyone to feel like they’re in it by themselves, not like they’re part of a collective thing. I’ve seen how the companies and the union operate for a long time. They play one shift off against the other. Then new hires against older guys. Then they play one plant off against another plant, like CAMI against Oshawa, or the old Ford Talbotville plant against Oakville, or Oakville against Windsor. Then they go and play Canadian plants off against American ones. I see what you guys are saying about globalized production and the need for us to have an international point of view and all stick together. But the union doesn’t think that way, so the company just goes ahead and whips contracts back and forth to the lowest bidder.”

Said Sue, “They keep trying to divide us. It’s the same with [Unifor President] Jerry Dias. There’s like 310,000 members of Unifor and what does he have for Twitter followers? Like about 8,000, and I bet half of them aren’t workers. If you look on his Twitter posts, it’s nothing about really organizing to fight the layoffs or concessions or stopping having no power when you come to work. It’s all about other things like how good [Prime Minister Justin] Trudeau is, or something on gender politics. Like the ‘Women of Wall Street’ stuff. Look, I’m all for equal rights, but I have more in common with Jim here than with any women on Wall Street.”

After decades of union-backed concessions, CAMI workers

are looking for a way to fight back. If a fight is to be conducted to recoup the wages, benefits and job protections handed over by Unifor, then workers must take the initiative themselves. The *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* urges CAMI workers to elect rank-and-file committees in the plant to draw up their own demands. This should include: opposition to all layoffs, the abolition of multi-tiered wages and benefits, and the restoration of company-paid pensions. Workers should also demand the transformation of all temporary and part-time workers into permanent employees, with full wages, benefits, and a 30 percent wage increase to offset years of eroding living standards.

Efforts by GM and Unifor to blackmail workers with job threats must be fought by reaching out to all workers across the auto and auto parts industry and preparing a common fight. At the same time, rank-and-file committees should appeal to workers in the US and Mexico to rebel against their corporate-controlled unions and fight for an international counter-offensive against the global auto giants.

CAMI workers have a special responsibility to come to the defense of the 13 Maruti Suzuki autoworkers in India who have just been sentenced to life imprisonment after being framed up on murder charges stemming from a July 2012 confrontation at their auto assembly plant near the capital city of Dehli. The workers are completely innocent. The corporation, with the full backing of the government and the courts, is railroading the workers for the “crime” of rebelling against a company-controlled union and fighting against starvation wages and sweatshop conditions.

All over the world, the transnational corporations and the capitalist political parties that serve them are waging a war against the working class. CAMI workers are part of this international fight. In the coming months, the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* will provide workers all the support possible for their struggle.



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