

GM CAMI workers strike in Canada

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Autoworkers struck the General Motors CAMI auto assembly plant outside of London, Ontario late Sunday night after the Unifor union and GM failed to reach agreement on a new three-year contract. The strike by 2,800 workers is the first at the assembly plant since 1992.

The walkout will all but halt production of GM's highly profitable Equinox SUV, which is only produced in smaller numbers at two other plants in Mexico. Workers at CAMI assembled more than 300,000 vehicles at the factory last year, making it one of the most productive and profitable in GM's system.

The strike will immediately hit production at GM's other operations, including an engine and transmission plant in St. Catharines, Ontario, that supplies CAMI, as well as suppliers that make components for the Equinox.

The walkout by CAMI workers is part of a growing wave of struggles by autoworkers around the world, including the 2015 rebellion by US autoworkers at Fiat Chrysler (FCA) and recent strikes by Korean GM workers, FCA workers in Serbia and VW workers in Slovakia. Last year, there was widespread opposition by rank-and-file workers to the concessions Unifor handed to the Detroit-based automakers.

Workers, who voted 99.8 percent for a strike last month, were quick to set up picket lines determined to recoup their losses from a series of concession contracts signed by Unifor and its predecessor, the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW). CAMI workers are forced to labour under a separate agreement than other Canadian autoworkers employed by GM, Ford and FCA—and their factory has long been used to set a lower labour cost benchmark that the unions could then impose on other autoworkers.

The Equinox is GM's third top selling product in the United States and the fourth biggest seller in Canada. US sales of the Equinox, which retails for

\$US25,000–\$US35,000 per vehicle, were up 67 percent in August. For the past eight years the CAMI plant has been running all out with three shifts producing vehicles six days a week.

CAMI workers have endured a ten-year wage freeze, the imposition of a two-tier wages and benefits system, with a third tier of temporary part time workers added in. They face relentless speed-up and the decimation of any semblance of a grievance procedure on the shop floor. In the last contract Unifor abandoned defined benefit pensions for new hires at the CAMI plant, which was then extended to all Canadian autoworkers in 2016.

If Unifor was forced to call the strike it is because there is enormous opposition among rank-and-file workers to any further concessions. GM is sitting on an \$18 billion cash hoard and funneling the profits it extracts from workers to pay billions in dividends and stock buybacks to enrich its top investors.

Plant Chairman Mike Van Boekel told reporters that the main unresolved issue in talks with the company was keeping production of the Equinox at the facility. “We want a guarantee that the Equinox is not leaving and GM will not do it,” he stated. “We want a guarantee that we are the lead plant.”

GM officials refused to designate CAMI as the lead plant for future Equinox production, union officials said, and offered investment of \$60 million, compared to \$400 million earmarked for a plant in Oshawa, Ontario, during contract talks last year.

Whatever jobs promise GM makes will not worth the paper it is written on. Instead, Unifor, like its counterpart in the United States, the United Auto Workers (UAW) has always used claims of securing new investments to justify further wage, benefit and working condition concessions. Indeed, last February, after GM's announcement of 625 job cuts at CAMI, Van Boekel told workers, “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.”

Last February, GM announced it was moving production of its Terrain model to Mexico. Unifor did nothing to oppose the destruction of jobs. The union rejects out of hand any fight to unify Canadian, US and Mexican workers in a common struggle to defend jobs against the global automakers. Instead Unifor, along with the UAW, are peddling the claim that the Trudeau government and the billionaire president in the United States, Donald Trump, will renegotiate the NAFTA agreement to favor the interests of workers in Canada and the US.

The promotion of economic nationalism by the Canadian and US unions has never saved a single job. On the contrary it has served to drive a wedge between North American workers and justify the relentless attacks on workers’ jobs and living standards in the name of “saving” Canadian or American jobs. Both unions accepted massive concessions during the 2009 restructuring of GM and Chrysler.

Thanks to “flexible contracts” with the UAW that include two-tier wage systems and profit-sharing payments instead of fixed raises GM's US hourly worker labour cost fell to \$US5 billion in 2015 compared with about \$US16 billion in 2005. Unifor has granted similar concessions.

Unifor officials have sought to silence opposition and brand as disloyal any opposition to its collaboration with management. If this struggle is not to be defeated, then rank-and-file workers must take over the conduct of the strike, block every effort to shut it down and impose a sellout deal, and fight to broaden the struggle throughout the Canadian, US and Mexican auto industry.

The WSWs will offer CAMI workers every assistance possible for this critical battle.



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