

CAMI workers challenge further de-industrialization of southwestern Ontario

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The strike at GM's CAMI assembly plant in Ingersoll, Ontario—now in its third week—is the first at any facility operated by the Detroit Three automakers in Canada in more than two decades.

The 2,800 CAMI workers are determined to put an end to years of speed-up, forced overtime, and contract concessions, including two-tier jobs with a 10-year “grow in” to regular wages and a decade-long wage freeze that has drastically eroded their purchasing power.

However, Unifor, the former Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), is refusing to raise, let alone wage a fight for, these just demands.

Instead, it has focused the strike entirely around its demand that GM name the CAMI plant the “lead producer” of its hot-selling Equinox SUV, so as to ensure that the brunt of any production cuts are borne by workers at GM's Mexican plants.

CAMI workers have every reason to be concerned about the future of their jobs. The automakers are utterly ruthless in their pursuit of profit, routinely closing plants and devastating entire communities to maximize shareholder value. Earlier this year, to pressure workers in the run-up to the September contract expiration, GM announced that it was transferring production of its Terrain model from CAMI to Mexico.

Moreover, southwestern Ontario, where CAMI and Ingersoll are located, has been devastated by plant closures for the past quarter century, turning a region long synonymous with manufacturing, especially auto production, into an industrial wasteland.

Unifor's push for “lead producer” status for the CAMI plant has nothing to do with a genuine struggle to win job security. Rather it is a continuation of the ruinous nationalist-corporatist strategy that Unifor has pursued for decades—a strategy that has consisted of imposing round after round of concessions so as to maintain the automakers' Canadian low-cost “advantage” and thereby entice them to locate production in Canada.

This strategy, the mirror image of what the UAW has pursued ostensibly in defence of “American jobs,” has pitted North American autoworkers against each other in a race to the bottom, whose only winner has been the automakers.

Unifor is suppressing the CAMI workers' struggle to roll back decades of concessions, to ensure that GM continues

making lavish profits off their sweat and toil.

As for the union's “lead producer” demand, Unifor has reportedly dropped it, or at least reformulated it, after GM ruled it out of hand. Giving voice to the arrogance of the auto bosses, GM has vowed it will accept no limits on its ownership “rights” to deploy its production facilities as it sees fit.

But even were GM to agree to give the CAMI plant “lead producer” designation, it would in no way represent a victory for workers. On the contrary, it would only further intensify the national divisions that the automakers, with the unions' whole-hearted support, have used to whipsaw workers and drive down the wages and working conditions of all workers.

Secure and decent-paying jobs should be social rights guaranteed to all. But to win these rights workers in North America and around the world must mount a common struggle to end the subordination of all socioeconomic life to the profits of a tiny clique of billionaires and multi-millionaires.

Southwestern Ontario: a region devastated by plant closures

The high-paid bureaucrats who staff the Unifor apparatus, that of the United Steelworkers (USW), and the other unions, are utterly opposed to any challenge to capitalism.

They have not lifted a finger to oppose the wave of plant closures that have seen Ontario's manufacturing sector shrink by over 300,000 jobs since 2002 and large parts of southwestern Ontario de-industrialized.

In the London, Ontario region (of which Ingersoll is part), workers have witnessed the closure of the CAW-organized St. Thomas Daimler Truck plant in 2008 costing 1,400 jobs, and the Ford assembly and Lear Seating plants in 2011 with the loss of 1,400 jobs.

The shuttering of Caterpillar's Electro-Motive Diesel plant in London in 2012 cost 450 jobs. Two years later, Kellogg closed its cereal plant, throwing 600 people out of work. In 2016, the *London Free Press* closed its printing facility, cashiering 135 workers, and Maple Leaf Foods followed suit with 400 layoffs

at their now defunct Thamesford operation.

Among London area manufacturers, only the armaments industry anchored by General Dynamics has avoided layoffs in the wake of whopping increases in military budgets in Canada, the United States and the Middle East.

A report released by Statistics Canada showed that 22 percent of children in the London region live in low-income households, the third highest child poverty rate in Canada. Overall, some 35,000 area residents live in “extreme poverty” gauged by income levels of below \$11,000 per year for individuals and \$19,000 for a single parent with a child.

In the metropolitan area, which includes St. Thomas and Strathroy, the median household annual income was the second lowest among all Ontario cities at \$64,700, representing a 2.1 percent drop over the past decade.

Windsor—about 190 kilometers from London and across the river from Detroit—has suffered the country’s biggest median income drop, 6.4 percent, over the past decade. Median income now stands at \$65,983, significantly below the Canadian average of \$70,300.

Twenty years ago, Windsor had one of the highest per capita incomes in all of Canada. Like London, Windsor has been ravaged by a relentless series of plant closures. In what was formerly the center of Detroit Three production in Canada, only the Fiat-Chrysler assembly plant has added employees over the past decade, although about a third of the 6,000 workers at the Windsor assembly plant fall under the second-tier provisions of the contract and receive vastly inferior wages and benefits. General Motors, which at its high point employed over 9,000 workers in Windsor, has shuttered all its operations in the city. Ford, with two dwindling plants, continues to put a question mark over the long-term viability of its Engine factory that employs about 400 workers.

In Hamilton, formerly Canada’s “Steel City,” little remains of the Stelco/US Steel/Bedrock operations. Only a few hundred workers remain at a plant that a generation ago employed over 14,000 steelworkers. Over the past 10 years, National Steel Car intermittently has laid off up to 1,500 workers due to volatile order books.

In an attempt to support themselves and their families many workers from Southwestern Ontario migrated to other parts of the country, particularly Alberta, until the collapse in oil prices in 2014 led to mass layoffs and wage cuts. Others are struggling to make ends meet by combining two or more low-paying service jobs.

Why has this endless roll call of devastation not provoked mass opposition and a working class counter-offensive?

Because the union bureaucracy has systematically suppressed the class struggle, opposing any challenge to capitalist property relations, while seeking to secure its privileges by integrating itself ever more completely into management and the state. Whenever workers have tried to fight back, the unions have ensured workers’ struggles remain isolated and confined within

a reactionary nationalist orientation.

This is exemplified by the role played by the Canadian Auto Workers, one year before it merged with the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers to form Unifor, in the shuttering of Caterpillar’s London EMD plant. In January 2012, EMD locked out 465 workers at the facility after they refused to accept wage cuts of up to 55 percent and the destruction of their pension plan. A month later, Caterpillar announced the lockout was being transformed into a plant shutdown and that it was moving production to Muncie, Indiana where workers were paid a mere \$12 an hour.

Throughout the struggle, the CAW did everything in its power to isolate the Caterpillar workers and prevent their struggle from challenging the highly profitable company. When Caterpillar revealed its closure plans, the CAW gave up without a fight and immediately began negotiating severance packages, i.e., the terms under which workers would be laid off and left to fend for themselves in a region where the manufacturing sector has been devastated.

The CAW, which emerged in a nationalist split from the United Auto Workers in 1985-86, also failed to make a single appeal to Caterpillar workers in the US, even though they faced similar concessions demands and brutal conditions of exploitation. As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote at the time, “For the CAW there was never any question of countering Caterpillar’s blackmail by seeking to mobilize US Caterpillar workers for a joint struggle. Its quick acceptance of the closure of the London plant underscores that it upholds the capitalists’ dictatorship over socioeconomic life and subordination of the most basic needs of working people to the profits of a few.” (See: Fight Ontario Caterpillar plant closure! Unite North American workers against wage-cutting!)

The unions’ complicity in the decimation of Ontario’s manufacturing sector demonstrates that CAMI workers and their co-workers throughout the auto industry require a new political perspective. They must reject the pro-capitalist and nationalist policies advanced by Unifor and fight to unite their struggles with autoworkers in the United States, Mexico and internationally on the basis of opposition to *all* concessions and the defence of *all* workers’ jobs. Only by waging their fight on the basis of a socialist and internationalist programme will autoworkers be able to win decent-paying, secure jobs, and reverse the decades of givebacks administered by the unions and their corporate cronies in one concessions-laden contract after another.



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