

Unifor union pushes nationalist poison over GM Oshawa closure plan

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In the wake of General Motors' announcement that it will close five plants in the US and Canada, including the Oshawa, Ontario, assembly plant, Unifor President Jerry Dias took his phony fightback campaign on the road Tuesday to meet with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. GM's restructuring plan will see the elimination of all 2,500 jobs at the Oshawa facility and another 12,200 production and white-collar jobs in the United States.

In a press conference held after his meeting with Trudeau, Dias said they discussed addressing "the elephant in the room," which was the low production costs for the auto companies in Mexico. Dias warned that if punitive tariffs were not imposed on vehicles entering Canada and the US from Mexico, then this could be the start of the complete disinvestment of GM, which also operates plants in St. Catharines and Ingersoll, Ontario, in Canada.

Dias had already confirmed that he had discussed the closure of the five plants with American United Auto Workers President Gary Jones and agreed that "serious, serious tariffs" must be imposed on Mexican auto exports. Jones, quickly cutting across his professed solidarity with Dias, then echoed US president Donald Trump's nationalist rants by calling on "patriotic consumers" to "say 'No' to American companies that choose foreign workers over American workers." Jones said nothing about the Oshawa closure or the fact that GM can find cheaper labour not only in Mexico but in the US due to decades of UAW givebacks, which have reduced labour costs below those in Canada.

The UAW and Unifor have long spewed reactionary nationalism to divide workers and justify their partnership with the auto corporations. The enemies of US and Canadian autoworkers are not the workers in Mexico, Asia, Europe or anywhere else, but the global

auto corporations and the giant banks and financial institutions which are attacking workers all over the world.

For his own part, according to Dias, Trudeau, who only yesterday accepted the Oshawa closure announcement as a *fait accompli*, offering only enhanced unemployment benefits and retraining programs, agreed to "roll up his sleeves and speak to General Motors." Trudeau indicated that he had spoken with Trump earlier in the day to explore a bi-national strategy to restrain the auto companies' transnational investments in Mexico.

Dias and Trudeau's big business Liberal Party have a close political relationship. The Unifor president acted as a trusted advisor to the Liberal government during the renegotiation of NAFTA earlier this year. Echoing the government's own statements, Dias hailed the unveiling of the new USMCA trade deal that consolidated a North American trade bloc against China as "a great day for Canadians."

In his meeting with Dias and facing a difficult election next fall, Trudeau was anxious to separate himself from the blunt acceptance statement from Ontario Conservative Premier Doug Ford. "They're (GM) gone. They're done. They told me straight. There's nothing they can do."

There certainly is much that autoworkers can do. But it has nothing to do with the blustering of the Unifor officials.

On Monday, when addressing GM Oshawa workers, Dias waived a letter from GM management purporting to guarantee a company footprint in Oshawa at least until 2020. GM, he declared, had broken their contractual obligations by announcing the closure of the plant by December 2019.

What he neglected to tell workers was that Unifor had

explicitly agreed to language in the 2016 contract that simply required management to give notice of “significant change” in operations. In any case, Unifor and the auto companies, have, as a matter of course, inserted standard language in every contract that allows GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler to alter employment levels “subject to market conditions.”

GM Oshawa workers will remember the events at their ratification meeting for their 2016 “framework agreement.” At that meeting, workers from the floor, skeptical of Dias’ promises of “job security,” demanded details of the actual product commitments from management. When pressed on this issue from one persistent worker, Dias contemptuously exclaimed, “You’re an idiot,” to the outrage of the over a thousand workers in attendance.

During the meeting, the gaping contract language loopholes were not mentioned by Unifor officials nor did they appear in the self-serving “highlights” brochure they handed out. Workers who wanted to see the whole contract before voting were denied that basic democratic right according to standard Unifor practice. After the narrow passage of yet another concessionary agreement, Dias declared, “The commitment to Oshawa is hundreds of millions of dollars, therefore our fear of a closure in 2019 is now over. The facilities clearly have a bright future.”

At his televised meeting with workers Monday, Dias threatened that “they are not closing our damn plant without one hell of a fight.” That “fight” did not take the form of a call from the podium for strike action after workers downed tools Monday morning in anticipation of the closure announcement. Instead, fearing that matters were quickly getting out of their control and the spontaneous walkout might escalate to a plant occupation, Unifor officials quickly ordered workers to stop picketing and go home. Oshawa plant chairman Greg Moffat then instructed workers to return to work Tuesday, saying, “We’re going in to work tomorrow and you’re going to build the best vehicles you can make.”

Veteran workers in Oshawa will see the union’s posturing as a familiar trick. At the ratification meetings for the freshly signed GM contract in 2008, union President Buzz Hargrove claimed the huge array of concessions granted to the company had “saved” jobs at the Oshawa complex, particularly at the truck

plant. But only months later, GM announced the truck plant closure, citing changed “market conditions.”

Hargrove, with his lieutenant Dias at his side, feigned shock and outrage over the closing, claiming it was a violation of the newly signed contract. Fiery speeches were then made by Hargrove threatening to shut GM down. Instead, union officials organized a stunt at GM office headquarters to prevent management from entering the building, all the while suppressing any actions by workers inside the factory. The office “blockade,” designed to take the steam out of growing worker resistance and uphold the authority of the union, ended with a predictable whimper and the truck plant closed in mid-2009.

If workers in Oshawa, and all the auto plants ravaged by concessionary contracts, layoffs and closures, are to resist GM’s plans, certain critical lessons must be understood.

First, such a fight can be waged only in relentless struggle against Unifor and the entire trade union bureaucracy. Workers should elect rank-and-file factory committees, independent of Unifor, to link up with autoworkers across Canada and the US and prepare strike action to block the plant closures.

Under conditions where GM, a transnational company with platforms in 31 countries, is responding to diminishing market share by re-organizing investment decisions on a global scale, workers must unite across all borders to fight the global auto companies.

GM’s insistence that, due to its private ownership of the auto factories, it has the inalienable right to destroy entire communities and close plants at will, shows that only a political fight guided by a socialist program can move the cause of the working class forward.



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