

GM Oshawa workers down tools after automaker confirms plant closure

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General Motors (GM) workers at the company's Oshawa plant in Ontario downed tools Tuesday night and Wednesday morning to protest the planned shutdown of the facility. The rank-and-file-initiated action came just hours after GM management confirmed its decision to halt production at the plant at the end of 2019 with the loss of 2,600 jobs.

The sit-down protest began Tuesday afternoon at around 5:00 p.m. and continued until 9:45 p.m., when the workers walked out of the plant *en masse* an hour before the scheduled end of their shifts. Videos and photos indicated that workers shut down the assembly line, but the overall impact remains unclear. Reports indicate a go-slow continued into Wednesday afternoon.

For its part, Unifor sought to distance itself from the action, making it clear that it was not initiated by the union. Expressing the fear and perplexity of the Unifor bureaucracy, Local 222 President Colin James, when asked whether protests would continue, told reporters, "We don't know what's going to happen next."

This week's protests follow the one-day rank-and-file-organized walkout from the Oshawa plant November 26, after GM's initial announcement of the closure of Oshawa and four other facilities in the United States.

In total, some 15,000 GM workers, hourly and salaried, will lose their jobs. The auto giant projects it can save around US\$6 billion with the closures, even though it raked in US\$6 billion in profits for the first nine months of last year.

Earlier on Tuesday, Unifor President Jerry Dias had met with GM top brass in Detroit to discuss Unifor's proposals to keep the plant open by offering more concessions. In a statement rejecting the union-drafted plan, GM noted that the proposals "would involve substantial incremental costs and a further deterioration

of GM's competitive position."

Unifor's proposals to GM, like its entire response to the automaker's onslaught on jobs, were based on a reactionary Canadian-nationalist and pro-capitalist perspective aimed at dividing workers in Oshawa from their class brothers and sisters in the United States, Mexico, and internationally while fostering illusions in the big business Liberal government led by Justin Trudeau.

At a press conference held across the border in Windsor after the meeting with GM's top brass, Dias was full of nationalist bluster. "There have been strategic decisions to move products from Canada to Mexico," Dias stated, reiterating his attacks on Mexican workers that have been made ever more regularly over recent years. "We argued you can reverse those decisions and bring a vehicle back to Canada." He also sought to appeal to retrograde anti-Americanism, denouncing the US-based GM for its "corporate greed" and declaring, "This is not only about jobs in Oshawa, but Canadians as a nation. ... GM today has not only picked a fight with Unifor, but picked a fight with all of Canada."

Unifor is continuing the same bankrupt promotion of Canadian nationalism that has led to the destruction of tens of thousands of auto jobs. Ever since the nationalist split-off from the United Auto Workers (UAW) by the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) in 1985, the CAW and its successor, Unifor, have pushed one round of concessions after another on the grounds that Canadian autoworkers had to help management compete with workers in the US and Mexico. These concessions have included wage cuts, the introduction of two-tier wages, job cuts, and the elimination of cost-of-living adjustments. The UAW's role in the US has been equally reactionary, allowing GM to whipsaw

jobs back and forth across the border to impose concessions.

During the last GM contract negotiations in 2016, Dias boasted that the concessions he agreed to would guarantee “Canadian jobs.” This strategy now lies in tatters. Little more than two years later, the entire workforce at GM’s oldest plant in Canada is to be laid off.

However, Unifor is determined to continue this ruinous course. The union has called a rally this Friday in Windsor to coincide with a GM investors meeting across the river in Detroit. No appeal whatsoever has been made to GM workers in the US to join the protest, which is being organized on an explicitly nationalist basis.

Unifor’s determination to block a common struggle by GM workers is not merely the result of a misguided policy by Dias and the union leadership, but is bound up with the transformation of the union over the past three decades into an appendage of corporate management. Dias and his fellow Unifor bureaucrats enjoy close ties to the big business Trudeau Liberal government, which they helped elect in 2015. Following GM’s initial announcement of the Oshawa plant closure, Dias sought to present the Liberals as the allies of workers, claiming that the Trudeau government could be persuaded to intervene and keep production in Oshawa. This is that same government that has forked over multibillion-dollar subsidies to big business to compete with Trump’s tax cuts in the US and gutted the rights of postal workers to strike so as to enforce steep concessions.

Unifor is so wedded to corporatist union-management collaboration that Unifor officials at the GM St. Catharines plant issued a report January 3 to workers denouncing talk of a boycott of GM products. “The Local Union has made it abundantly clear to the National Union that although we support Oshawa in their campaign to stay open we will not do anything that will put our facility at risk,” the report stated.

Meanwhile, the Unifor leadership at the GM CAMI plant in Ingersoll, Ontario, has been conspicuously silent on the threatened closure of the GM Oshawa plant

The action taken by GM Oshawa demonstrates the determination of autoworkers to fight and is a welcome development. However, if workers leave the conduct of

their fight in the hands of Unifor, it will inevitably be betrayed. To be successful in their struggle, autoworkers must organize a rank-and-file factory committee elected from the most trusted militant workers to take charge of their fight. The committee should issue an urgent appeal for a joint struggle to GM workers and other autoworkers in Canada, the United States, Mexico and internationally as part of a united fight to defend the 15,000 GM workers threatened with lay-offs and the tens of thousands of additional jobs in the parts, supplier, and other industries that will be affected by GM’s job massacre.

An important step in organizing such an international fight back by autoworkers has already been taken. At a meeting organized by the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* in Detroit in December, autoworkers from Ford, GM and Fiat Chrysler agreed to form a coordinating committee to plan protests and mobilize the working class as a whole in struggle against GM’s plant shutdowns and the broader assault by the ruling elites around the world on working class living standards. Workers at the Oshawa plant looking for a way to fight back should study and discuss the resolution passed at the meeting, which offers a program to take forward the struggle in defense of their jobs and livelihoods.



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