Behind Kia's patronizing Super Bowl ad, auto company makes billions off low wage labor in US South

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On the eve of the mass layoff of thousands of North American General Motors salaried workers and the shutdown of five General Motors plants in the US and Canada, South Korean automaker Kia aired a patronizing "pro-worker" advertisement campaign introducing a new luxury SUV model during Sunday's 53rd Super Bowl—the most watched and the most expensive annual sporting event in the US.

The ad, which is narrated by a child, features the town of West Point, Georgia—where Kia has its only American manufacturing plant—depicting struggling autoworkers as proudly devoting themselves to a lifetime of unrecognized hard labor.

While mixing somber footage of the rural town with slick imagery of their new 2020 Telluride luxury car model, the child narrator earnestly states, "We're just a small Georgia town of complete unknowns … Our movie stardom, our football careers—they never took off."

The boy continues, "Because we are not known for who we are, we hope to be known for what we do, what we build, this thing we've assembled. It has a chance to be remembered. No, we are not famous, but we are incredible." Cutting to a scene of the luxury SUV driving through a body of water in a forest in slow motion, the narration concludes with, "And we make incredible things."

The advertisement then cuts to the text, "Here's to the great unknowns," followed by the car model name, "Telluride," then ended with viewers and workers presented with the slogan and command to "Give it Everything."

It is true that humanity's productive forces produce incredible things. But this hypocritical display of admiration for struggling workers—for the sake of boosting car sales—encourages the acceptance of, and pride in, wage-slavery. The ad also shows how the wealthy corporate elite views the working class—as "unknowns"—revealing the miles of separation between the two classes in society.

Kia's new campaign also included a shorter Super Bowl ad announcing "The Great Unknowns" scholarship. The ad, narrated by the same child, states, "Companies everywhere are choosing celebrity endorsers for their big game ad. Millions will be paid…What if some of those celebrity paychecks got set aside to help unfamous people. What if this year, in some way, it was about the rest of us?"

"The Great Unknowns" scholarship gives a whopping $5,000 a year to 16 undergraduate students who embody the spirit of "Give it Everything." By contrast, Kia spent approximately $20.8 million on airing these two ads alone (Super Bowl LIII ads were priced at an insane $5.2 million per 30 seconds this year), while they dole out a miserly $80,000 for their scholarship fund, which supposedly is "about the rest of us"!

In addition to the two ads that were aired, a supplementary short film on the town of West Point, Georgia, appears on the ad campaign's website. It presents the opening of the Kia plant in 2010 as a saving grace for the town after large industrial cotton mills closed in 2004, which brought about significant economic hardship. But West Point is far from flourishing today. Economic figures for 2017 report the median household income as $31,489, with 27.6 percent of the population below the poverty line. It is of note that the pay on Kia's website for a production

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worker at the West Point plant is a shoddy $15.89/hr or $33,000/year.

According to a 2006 CBS article, when Kia was considering West Point as its American assembly site, the company received a $258 million incentive package from the state, which included $76 million in job tax credits, $61 million to buy and build the project site, $20 million for a job training center, and $130 million in county property tax abatements for a period of 15 years. This collaboration in tax evasion between a corporation and the state resulted in millions of dollars in taxes being diverted from the support of needed services in West Point and surrounding areas.

Industrial workers in the southern US states historically earn lower wages than their Midwest counterparts. Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, South Carolina and Louisiana are the only states in the US with no state minimum wage, while Georgia's state minimum wage is an absurd $5.15 per hour. Most employers in these states, however, are subject to paying the federal minimum wage—a sub-poverty $7.25 an hour.

A 2014 report by the National Employment Law Project found that auto parts workers in Alabama saw a 24 percent decline in their wages (inflation-adjusted) since 2001, while Mississippi auto parts workers saw a 13.6 percent decline. The same report found that the national real wage average of auto assembly workers declined 21 percent from 2003 to 2013, from $31.45 to $24.83.

Kia, a global corporation worth $12.7 billion and partially owned by Hyundai, has extracted billions in profits on the backs of low-wage labor in the US South and other parts of the world. Over the past decade, Kia and Hyundai have carried out austerity measures at their South Korean plants, which have been met by workers' strikes.

Kia's slick new ad campaign is foul corporate propaganda. Just as GM's decision to close five plants and turn its backs on thousands of salaried workers arises out of the same private profit system, Kia will not hesitate to follow suit in West Point if sales diminish.

Kia's ad was not the only anti-working class Super Bowl campaign. The WSWS has noted the launching of a reactionary ad campaign by the Canadian union Unifor aired to Canadian viewers of the Super Bowl, which called on viewers to boycott General Motors vehicles assembled in Mexico in order to divert workers anger over the impending closure of its Oshawa, Ontario, plant by stoking nationalism and racism.

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