

GM to keep Detroit-Hamtramck plant open until January 2020

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In a surprise announcement, General Motors now says that it will keep its Detroit-Hamtramck Assembly Plant open until January 2020. It had originally been slated to close next month with the loss of some 1,500 jobs.

In a statement reported Thursday General Motors said it was “balancing production timing” on the Cadillac CT6 built at the Detroit-Hamtramck facility. GM will also temporarily continue production of the Chevrolet Impala. Production of the Buick LaCrosse and Chevrolet Volt ended February 15. Management said nothing about the fate of the other targeted facilities including Lordstown, Ohio assembly, which is set to close March 8, and GM’s Oshawa, Ontario facility, which is set to close by the end of the year.

The plant closures are part of restructuring plan involving the elimination of 14,000 jobs in North America. Thousands of layoffs began earlier this month, impacting white-collar workers at the Warren Tech Center, GM headquarter offices, the Proving Grounds and other operations.

There is widespread opposition among rank-and-file workers to the closure of the factories and the complicity of the United Auto Workers and its Canadian counter-part Unifor. The announcement by GM of a temporary extension of production at the Detroit-Hamtramck plant follows a February 9 demonstration organized by the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* and the Socialist Equality Party, which was the first politically conscious expression of that mass opposition.

The demonstration called for the formation of rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to fight for unity of workers in the US, Mexico and Canada against the plant closures. It connected this fight with the call for an offensive by workers to restore UAW givebacks, including the abolition of tiers and the making of all part time workers regular employees with full rights and benefits.

Faced with growing opposition, GM and the UAW are recalibrating their actions. The delay will put the closure date after what both parties hope will be the negotiation of a new deal to replace the four-year labor contracts, which expire on September 14. The possible retention of the Detroit-Hamtramck or another plant will be used as a carrot to demand massive concessions from workers.

In a joint statement, UAW President Gary Jones and Vice President Terry Dittes welcomed the decision that production would continue until the end of the year. “For the UAW brothers and sisters at Hamtramck, today is a sense of relief for their families and the community.” It continued, “The UAW welcomes today’s announcement that Hamtramck production will continue.”

Jones and Dittes claimed the UAW would leave “no stone unturned” to avoid the plant closings. They added, “Again, we commend GM for today’s decision and we reiterate the importance of a collective bargaining process in times like these.”

Such claims have zero credibility given the record of the UAW, which is under a continuing investigation for colluding with the auto companies to siphon off money from joint programs in exchange for signing sweetheart contracts. Instead the UAW and GM plan to use the plant closings as a bludgeon to extract concessions from autoworkers in the upcoming contract talks.

The announcement by GM comes as more than 500 Detroit-Hamtramck workers have already transferred to other facilities, including the GM Flint Truck Plant, as well as plants in Tennessee, Kentucky and Texas.

Workers forced to transfer face serious hardship, the uprooting of families or, in the case of workers transferring from Detroit to Flint, extended commutes leaving little time for family life or personal time. Hundreds of temporary part-time workers, who have no seniority rights, workers with lower seniority, and contract workers face indefinite layoffs.

The unexpected reprieve for the Detroit facility, if only temporary, angered workers who recently transferred to Flint. Many would have preferred to stay in Detroit if they had realized that option was open.

A contract worker with GM Subsystems at the Detroit-Hamtramck plant told the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*: “With all the (higher seniority) people gone to other states I bet they hire people off the streets before they give us a chance. They have done it before. A lot of Subsystems people are just saying ‘forget it!’

“We don’t have any rights to anything. People were surprised by the announcement. You have people who went and got other jobs, waiting for layoff papers, and now they are stuck. The UAW told those that are still there waiting for transfers, still have to go,” even though the plant closing is delayed, he said.

The mass transfers of higher seniority workers out of the Detroit-Hamtramck and Lordstown plants have had the effect of creating facilities that are staffed largely by lower-paid tier two workers, temporary part time workers and subcontract workers. This could be the starting point for demands by GM in upcoming contract talks that pay rates and conditions at these plants be permanently lowered as a condition for maintaining production at these facilities.

In the 2015 agreement the UAW agreed to special terms imposing a lower pay progression on workers at Ford Sterling Axle, Rawsonville powertrain and Woodhaven Hot Metal Forming plants with tier two workers topping out at \$19.86 after four years, far below the \$29 an hour regular in progression workers receive after eight years. The agreement also committed the UAW to helping management drive older, high seniority workers out of these plants in order to create a low paid workforce.

Job saving agreements and concessions contracts signed by the UAW have done nothing to prevent the automakers from eliminating hundreds of thousands of jobs. In the 2015 the UAW agreed to remove limits on the number of temporary part time workers in the plants. These workers enjoy none of the rights and benefits of regular workers, including seniority and transfer rights, and they can be laid off without cost to the company.

Expressing its nationalist orientation, the UAW statement made no mention of the closure of the Oshawa plant in Canada. Nor did Jones and Dittes make a reference to the ongoing and courageous struggle by maquiladora workers in Mexico, whose strike has impacted production at facilities across North America, with reports of parts shortages at the Ford Flat Rock plant,

the Fiat Chrysler Windsor minivan plant and Ford in Oakville, Ontario.

The UAW insists that US autoworkers should view Mexican and Canadian workers as adversaries in a competitive bidding war to see which plants can slash the most costs in order to convince GM to preserve jobs. In response to the strikes in Mexico, US and Canadian-based auto parts suppliers have threatened to shift production out of that country rather than pay higher wages. The UAW and Unifor have essentially endorsed the demand to throw Mexican workers out of their jobs through their filthy nationalist campaign calling for a boycott of GM vehicles assembled in Mexico.

While the UAW and Unifor peddle nationalism, it is clear that autoworkers all over the world face a common fight. At the same time that GM is carrying out the shutdown of plants in Detroit, earlier this month Ford announced it is closing its oldest plant in Brazil in Sao Bernardo do Campo and ending truck production in South America at a cost of 2,700 jobs. Honda, meanwhile, has said that it will close its only car plant in Britain in 2021 with the loss of 3,500 jobs. The announcement follows the report that a planned restructuring by Land Rover will involve 4,500 job cuts, most in Britain.

These experiences further underscore the necessity for workers to form their own rank-and-file committees, independent of the UAW, to wage a fight against concessions and for the restoration of all givebacks, including the abolition of all tiers and low paid subcontract work. Workers interested in learning more should contact the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter*.



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