

Workers and residents denounce GM Lordstown closure

Tim Rivers
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Following the closure last week of the iconic General Motors plant in Lordstown, Ohio, reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* visited the area to speak to workers and their families. Autoworkers, teachers, high school students, parents and general laborers denounced the steel and auto corporations that have devastated the Mahoning Valley with mass layoffs over the past four decades, along with their accomplices in the unions who collaborated with management in imposing repeated rounds of concessions under the false pretense of saving jobs.

A recent study by Cleveland State University estimates that idling the Lordstown factory will cost the local economy, already devastated by the shutdown of the steel industry, an additional \$3 billion. It further estimates that 1,256 more private-sector jobs will be lost, in addition to the 1,607 jobs cut as a direct result of the plant ceasing operations.

Added to the previous destruction of the third and second shifts, the cumulative economic impact to the region is estimated at \$8.2 billion with a total loss of 7,711 jobs or 4.4 percent of employment in the Ohio part of the Youngstown-Warren-Boardman metropolitan area. (The area also includes Mercer County, Pennsylvania)

The closure reopens the wounds from Black Monday 40 years ago, when 10,000 jobs were destroyed in a single day as Youngstown Sheet and Tube closed down. Many workers we spoke with bitterly recalled the impact. Altogether 60,000 jobs were destroyed from the mill, related suppliers and service industries.

Jerry was laid off last week after 20 years at GM. He joined a conversation with several others in the parking lot of a local supermarket. “America in general” he said in disgust, “not just GM. It’s vulture capitalism. Like Bush said, ‘capitalism works.’”

The *Youngstown Vindicator* newspaper and other media have been playing up attempts by the Democrats and the UAW to blame workers in Mexico and China for the layoffs. The *Youngstown Vindicator* published a half-page

photograph of the last Chevy Cruze rolling off the assembly line draped in an American flag.

But like most workers we spoke with, Jerry rejected this reactionary rubbish. “It’s the same in many countries,” he said, “it’s universal.”

Jerry’s father retired from Lordstown and was proud of the union. That trust which was built on the sacrifice and struggles of generations of industrial workers has been dragged in the mud. “The UAW have been bribed, to push through contracts,” he said. “In the ’60s and ’70s they used to fight. I remember growing up in union families, in the steel mills and auto plants.

“My dad worked at Lordstown and was proud to be UAW. The union took care of us. Then they started taking a little bit of concessions. Now there’s nothing left. They have taken everything. They have all that technology, robots everywhere. What we need are jobs for working class people.”

There is a deep anger and growing militancy among rank-and-file workers, but they have absolutely no say in the direction of the UAW, which accepts every dictate of the corporations and functions as a labor police force for the employers. The union gave up fighting long ago, having transformed itself into a junior partner in the exploitation of workers.

The local school board reports that more than 10 percent of Lordstown’s enrollment, between 50 and 75 students, will be directly affected by the closure, although the final number that the district will lose is still up in the air. Young people are quite disturbed.

A group of students from Austintown Fitch High School denounced the attack on jobs. “They shouldn’t have to leave their hometown to go find a new job because the Lordstown plant shut down,” said Haley. “This whole area is short jobs because everything is closing.

“They closed the steel mills and now the GM plant. Everyone is losing jobs. They have to struggle to find a job to stay in their home; and if not, they have to move.”

Her friend Tyler added, “I’m a high school senior, and I

don't even know where I'm going to work."

Ron works for a local baking company. "The valley is struggling now," he said. "The shutdown is going to affect everybody. I just don't see anything positive from it at all. Jobs are tough enough now, especially for the young kids coming out of school. What are they going to do?"

John McCombs applied for a job at the plant when it first opened in 1966. When he wasn't hired, he went overseas in the military. On returning in the spring of 1970, GM had just added the van plant, expanding the workforce to more than 12,000, and he hired in.

"It was rough," he said. "We were building 108 cars an hour. It was a tiresome job. You humped. There were a lot of jobs that were real bad.

"I have a bad taste in my mouth for the union. They line their pockets. If you're in the clique, you don't have to do anything and you get paid. But otherwise you're on your own."

Michelle is 48 and has lived in Youngstown all her life. She remembers the mills closing. "It was the start of the downfall of this whole community, and now it's going to get even worse. Youngstown's not a good place any more. It really isn't. The roads are horrible. We have horrible schools. The taxes are terrible.

"I started home schooling my kids in 2007. That's how bad it got for me. They lost transportation. They were losing all the programs at school, and there was no special education—no anything, no art, no music. You couldn't do any sports after that in Youngstown.

"We gave GM those tax cuts on top of it. That wasn't fair, Obama's restructuring in 2009. They just pulled the rug out from underneath us. There's not any difference between Democrats and Republicans. There is going to be a social explosion. Especially the more financially strained everybody gets. Literally, every single day you hear of some other business that is closing."

Gerry Vasko, a retired teacher was particularly offended by the Sunday editorial by local journalist Bertram deSouza in the *Youngstown Vindicator* newspaper. "He said that if autoworkers had voted for Clinton, the plant would not be shut," said Gerry. "I didn't want to vote for her, but we didn't have an alternative.

"And they say the economy is so great," she continued. "But where is it so great? What are these people going to do from Lordstown? Are they going to move, pull up their roots? Are they going to stay here and try to find something else? It's insane. More stores have closed around here. Businesses, bigger businesses, smaller businesses. Toys R Us went under and the pet store next to it.

"Of course, now we lost General Motors and all the companies that manufactured products for General Motors.

The unions are making millions off the backs of the workers."

De Souza's article is worth noting because it is typical of the foul calumny directed against the working class by both Democrats and union officials. His argument, a lie from beginning to end, is that Obama's restructuring of GM and Chrysler in 2009 "saved the auto industry" and that the large number of workers who voted against Democrat Hillary Clinton in 2016 are getting what they deserve as plants are shut down and jobs slashed.

He turns reality on its head when he writes, "The end of car production at the Lordstown plant and, quite possibly, the permanent closing of the cavernous facility later this year is on the heads of those autoworkers who were unwilling to give political credit where it was due."

On the contrary, autoworkers had good reason for their hostility to the Democratic Party administration. Obama supervised the greatest transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top in history. Tens of trillions were funneled to the banks and hedge funds while the auto corporations were encouraged to slash pay for new hires, flood the shops with temporary workers and destroy the eight-hour work day while shutting plants and slashing jobs.

Quincy Burgess works in a food processing plant for a temporary agency at minimum wage.

All of his relatives worked at GM. "I feel for the people at GM," he said. "My two cousins just got sent to Tennessee. They had to go way down there just to keep going to work. They just disregarded all the people around here.

"It's really bad around here. There just are not a lot of resources. I am sitting here struggling. I go to work, pay my taxes. I'm just struggling. It's terrible.

"If you aren't rich, you ain't got nothing coming. The capitalistic system has no regard for the people that helped them to make that money in the first place.

"I used to think capitalism was something that was necessary to keep things going. But it's probably the problem."



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