

Unifor announces bogus ‘job saving’ plan as GM moves to close Oshawa plant

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In a March 19 announcement, Unifor President Jerry Dias stated that his union will suspend its Save Oshawa GM publicity campaign whilst Dias explores with General Motors avenues to slightly adjust the company’s 2019 plant closing schedule.

General Motors has targeted the Oshawa assembly plant for closure in the latter half of 2019 as part of a restructuring program that will see 2,600 union jobs lost in Oshawa and another 12,500 white collar and production jobs cut and four plants closed in the United States.

The discussions, however, will not alter GM’s plan to shutter its Oshawa, Ontario, assembly plant. As Dias wrote, “While it is clear to the union that GM has no intention of extending vehicle manufacturing beyond December of 2019, we are examining the potential to transform operations so as to maintain a base level of hourly employment. The parties have agreed to continue talks over the next few weeks and Unifor’s priority is to save as many jobs as possible in Oshawa.”

On Thursday, GM Canada’s vice president of corporate affairs, David Patterson, explained that the discussions with Unifor are largely related to adjustments recently announced in the closure schedule for Detroit’s Hamtramck assembly plant. Earlier this month, GM said it was “balancing production timing” on the Cadillac CT6 built at the Hamtramck facility and will also temporarily continue production of the Chevrolet Impala. This would keep the plant open until January 2020 instead of closing it this month as previously scheduled. Production of the Buick LaCrosse and Chevrolet Volt in Detroit has already ended while GM’s Lordstown, Ohio, assembly plant was closed March 8.

There will be “some modest Oshawa job and work upside in the second half of this year because Oshawa

does some stamping work for the Detroit Hamtramck plant,” said Paterson. It is estimated that several hundred workers in Oshawa could be affected by this extension, leaving over 2,000 workers without a job at the assembly plant and thousands more permanently idled in the Ontario auto parts industry. Alongside, the temporary extension of stamping work, Dias hopes to arrange for agreements on a small skeleton crew for facility and truck bay maintenance and additional early retirement buyouts.

The extension of some assembly work in Hamtramck is entirely bound up with GM’s preparations for this year’s contract negotiations with the UAW. Faced with growing rank-and-file opposition to the company’s closure plans and a groundswell of worker demands for significant improvements in the miserable contracts they now toil under, GM and the UAW are recalibrating their actions. The slight extension of some production in Hamtramck now puts the closure date after what both parties hope will be the negotiation without a strike of a new deal to replace the four-year labor contracts, which expire on September 14. The possible continued retention of some work at Hamtramck or other vulnerable US based plants will be used as a carrot to demand yet another brutal round of contract concessions from workers.

US President Trump is pressing the UAW to immediately reopen the contract in order to impose drastic concessions on workers to reopen or find another buyer for the Lordstown plant. Trump coupled that with renewed calls for GM to close Mexican, Chinese and other plants outside the borders of the US. As for the UAW, it needs little encouragement to use the threat of plant closings to wrench concessions from its members.

Workers in Oshawa will be entirely familiar with this

tactic. During the 2016 Canadian contract negotiations, Unifor picked GM to set the pattern, then accepted the institutionalization of the hated two-tier system, work-rule concessions and a miserable wage and benefits settlement in exchange for “guarantees” that the Oshawa plant would stay open for the life of the collective agreement. At the ratification meetings, Dias felt it circumspect to not mention clauses in the deal that gave the company the right to alter production plans based on “changing market conditions”.

The possibility of a slight extension of some Oshawa stamping work will remind veteran workers in Oshawa of a similar exercise by GM during the mothballing of its truck plant in 2009, which saw a delay in the original closure plan that kept some workers on the job for a few additional weeks. This allowed the leaders of the Canadian Auto Workers (the predecessor of Unifor) to claim, without a hint of shame, that they did all they could to push back against the company’s initial plan.

Over the past several months autoworkers have witnessed the phony fire-and-brimstone pontification of Dias. Unifor, he would yell, will not accept the closure of the Oshawa plant. The union would launch “a helluva fight” that would force GM to back down from its plan. But what did this “fight” actually consist of?

Unifor steadfastly opposed any struggle by rank-and-file to strike or occupy the plant and fight for spreading the strike throughout Canada and the rests of North America. When workers spontaneously sat down in the plant after the initial closure announcement was made in November and then assembled at the union hall, Dias and Unifor Plant Chairman Greg Moffat made sure to instruct workers to show up for their next shift and continue production. Similarly, when workers spontaneously stopped production on January 8 and sat down in the plant after GM confirmed it would not alter its closure decision, Moffat rushed back from Detroit to ensure the action would not turn into an occupation and led the workers out of the plant after GM management, also fearing the possibility of an occupation, ordered the shift to end early.

Later in January a toothless demonstration at the gates of GM offices was quickly dismantled. Two production stoppages at nearby parts suppliers lasting a few hours were not meant to extend beyond the length of a shift. Instead, Unifor launched a media campaign, dripping with anti-Mexican nationalist poison, calling

for a consumer boycott of all GM vehicles sold in Canada that were assembled in Mexico. For Unifor, it was the jobs of Mexican workers that had to be cut, continuing with the union’s decades-old whip-saw tactics that has pit workers in one country against those in another and set the stage for a never-ending race to the bottom for ever diminishing jobs and wages.

The anti-Mexican campaign was launched as more than 70,000 maquiladora workers in Matamoros, Mexico, conducted a courageous strike against the foreign-owned auto parts companies and corrupt unions, leading to a shortage of steering wheels and other parts and a slowdown of production across North America and message of solidarity by Canadian and US GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler workers.

The spontaneous actions in Oshawa demonstrate the determination of autoworkers to fight. To be successful in their struggle, autoworkers must organize rank-and-file factory committees, independent of Unifor and the UAW, to take charge of their struggle. These committees should issue an urgent appeal for a joint fightback to GM workers and other autoworkers in Canada, the United States, Mexico and internationally as part of a united fight to defend the jobs and living standards of all workers.



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