

Anger builds over GM plant closures and layoffs

Tom Hall
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Opposition to General Motors' plans to close five plants in the US and Canada and destroy nearly 15,000 jobs is continuing to grow. The plant closures will have a devastating impact on surrounding working-class communities with the loss of thousands of related jobs and millions of dollars in tax revenue, which will lead local governments to slash education and other vital services.

GM has already shuttered the Lordstown, Ohio plant, eliminating 1,500 jobs at the complex that once employed 13,000 workers on three shifts. It is pressing ahead with plans to close the Oshawa, Ontario and Detroit-Hamtramck plants, as well as two transmission plants in Warren, Michigan and Baltimore, Maryland by the end of the year or early January 2020.

The giant corporation made \$11.8 billion in 2018 profits and the expected cost savings of \$4.5 billion is less than a quarter of the \$25 billion corporate management spent on stock buybacks and dividend payments for its richest investors since 2015. Fearing a social explosion, the United Auto Workers (UAW) union, the Trump administration and the Democrats are blaming the job losses on Mexican and Chinese workers and are seeking to wrench even more concessions from the 150,000 GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler workers whose labor contracts expire in mid-September.

Residents at a town hall meeting Saturday morning in the Detroit enclave of Hamtramck discussed the imminent closure of General Motors' Detroit-Hamtramck Assembly plant, which is slated to close next January. The 34-year-old factory, which once employed 4,000 workers, has around 800 employees left after the elimination of the second shift in early 2017, and the forced retirements and transfers that followed the closure announcement last November.

The loss of the plant will be a devastating blow to the working-class community of 22,000 residents, half of whom live under the official poverty line. Speaking at the town hall meeting, Hamtramck city manager Kathy Angerer said the closure would cost the city \$800,000 out of an annual \$16 million budget, or around 5 percent. "It's not a one-time hit of \$800,000, it's year after year, after year, of that money," she said.

Roughly \$115,000 would disappear from the city's annual school budget, Angerer said. Jaleelah Ahmed, director of English Learning for Hamtramck Public Schools, explained to the *World Socialist Web Site* what this would mean for her students. "We are already severely under resourced. We are using old texts and curriculum and in need of more teachers due to the high percentage of English-language learners in the district. I love what I do, but we need more resources." Hamtramck is home to one of the largest South Asian immigrant communities in the country.

Andrew Oleksiak, a lieutenant in the Hamtramck Fire Department,

explained how the plant closure would worsen the already precarious situation facing firefighters and city residents. "We are already understaffed in violation of our contract." He said the loss of revenue from the plant could be used by the local government to launch new attacks on the fire department or eliminate it entirely, either by obtaining an agreement with the city of Detroit for fire coverage or by reclassifying police as "public safety officers," effectively using the police force as the fire department.

The closure of Detroit-Hamtramck Assembly in particular has touched a nerve because of the circumstances behind the building of the plant in the 1980s, when city officials in Hamtramck and Detroit seized and demolished more than 1,500 homes, businesses and churches in the Poletown neighborhood to make way for the plant. At the time, the local Democratic Party, led by Detroit Mayor Coleman Young, justified the use of eminent domain to destroy the historic neighborhood, claiming the plant would bring jobs and economic prosperity to the area.

"I remember when GM tore down our homes, giving the residents pennies on the dollar for their homes," said Ginny Petzold, a long-time resident. "Now 30 years later they are doing this to us again. I hope this comes around 10 times on [GM CEO] Mary Barra. It's immoral."

Her son, Karl, added, "They say they are giving laid off workers new jobs. But they're going to have to uproot their families and go to Flint or out of state to keep their jobs. It's all about the almighty dollar. We have to make them accountable."

"How do we hit GM?" Ginny asked. "I'm not sure if people will stand up and strike them but I hope the workers fight."

Mitchell Kowalewicz, a meat cutter, added, "The rich don't care, and as far as the government is concerned, we're just numbers. What GM is doing is a crime.

"I've been a resident of Hamtramck for 61 years, since 1958, and my family has been here since 1914. This used to be a nice, booming city, like Detroit, where families could live decently. There was the Dodge Main plant, built by the Dodge Brothers in 1914, Chevy Gear & Axle and lots of car dealerships on Joseph Campau street. Now there are boarded up empty buildings here.

"I'm for workers fighting this. We have to, just to live and survive."

The plant closures are part of a global restructuring effort by the auto industry, which is carrying out layoffs and plant closures internationally. Last week, Ford announced the elimination of 5,000 jobs in Germany as part of its "Fitness Program," which could claim as many as 25,000 jobs worldwide. Before that, Volkswagen announced 7,000 job cuts. In the face of signs of a global economic slowdown, Wall Street and other investors are demanding sweeping

job cuts and other cost-cutting to increase profit margins.

Thus far, the companies have only been able to get away with these cuts through the complicity and support of the trade unions. In the United States, a widening corruption scandal, which recently led to the indictment of former United Auto Workers Vice President Norwood Jewell, has exposed the UAW as a bought-and-paid-for agent of management. Details have emerged in the federal corruption case about how the UAW received millions in bribes from Fiat Chrysler in return for concessions in national contracts between 2007 and 2015, which the union forced through against mass opposition from autoworkers.

The local Democratic Party, led by Hamtramck Mayor Karen Majewski, called Saturday's meeting in an attempt to get out in front of popular opposition and redirect it toward fruitless appeals to the company, the political establishment and the unions. This included plans to attract a new owner for the factory, a move that would entail massive wage and benefit cuts, in addition to new tax concessions.

The public discussion period was overseen by David Hecker, president of the Michigan Federation of Teachers and executive vice president of the Metropolitan AFL-CIO. Before the meeting, Hecker co-wrote an editorial in the *Detroit Free Press* with American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten denouncing GM's "south-of-the-border strategy" and urging GM to "work with us to consider all feasible options" beside closing the plant.

The AFT and its state and local affiliates, which have spent the last year trying to shut down a national wave of strikes by public school teachers against austerity and inequality, sabotaged the struggle against the privatization of Detroit Public Schools in 2016. Hecker attempted to frame the town hall discussion around developing a "coalition of labor and business" to outline "concrete plans to save the plant," or, in the likely event that GM would not change its mind, "figure out what GM owes this community." This included getting GM to pay "promise scholarships" to students whose city would be devastated by the closure.

Representatives of the Democratic Socialists of America and other pseudo-left groups did their best to peddle illusions in the UAW and the Democratic Party. Jerry Goldberg of Moratorium Now and formerly of the Workers World Party offered to provide his services as a lawyer to help city officials sue GM for supposedly violating the terms of Obama's 2009 restructuring of GM and Chrysler and the so-called mega-tax credit agreement given to the giant corporation by state Democrats and Republicans themselves. A member of the Young Democratic Socialists of America suggested that the plant be converted under the Democrats' bogus Green New Deal plan.

The UAW was represented at the meeting by LaTrello Sephers, a union trustee for the UAW Local 155 and Democratic candidate for the Michigan state legislature. When a community member expressed his disappointment that the UAW had not sent an official representative to the meeting, Sephers erupted in anger and shouted at him to "never speak about the UAW like that ever again."

In response to the popular anger against GM, the union rep came to the defense of the corporation when he got up to speak. He turned to the audience and asked, "How many of you are driving foreign cars? For all of you that are driving foreign cars, or you know somebody that's driving foreign cars, they're the problem," Sephers said.

Sephers denounced any suggestion that the autoworkers strike to defend their jobs and living standards, saying, "It takes at least two years for people to get their families together and all of that kind of

stuff. You can't just say on a whim, 'We're going to go out here and strike,' it don't work that way," he said.

Responding to palpable displeasure with these arrogant comments, Hecker absurdly claimed that the UAW "is fighting every single day to try and keep these plants open and try to protect these jobs."

The broader political and class issues were introduced into the discussion by supporters of the Socialist Equality Party. Jerry White, editor of the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* said, "There is a growing sentiment of struggle" all over the world, White said pointing to the rebellion of the Mexican auto parts workers against the corporations and the unions.

"If we're going to conduct a fight there is going to have to be a serious discussion. What are we fighting? We're fighting massive corporations; we're fighting capitalism. These corporations control lock stock and barrel every one of these politicians. When Obama restructured the auto industry, the criterion was cutting the wages of young workers in half. The Democratic Party just as much as Trump and the Republicans," he said, "are stooges of the corporations. If there's going to be a fight, it has to come from the working class ourselves."

Calling attention to the role of the UAW, White pointed to last week's indictment of former UAW president Norwood Jewell who was part of the massive bribery scandal, which involved Fiat Chrysler executives paying UAW negotiators to sign pro-company deals.

Once Jewell's name was mentioned, Sephers erupted, and Hecker and the Democrats tried to shut down the SEP member's comments, but audience members insisted he be allowed to finish. White appealed for residents to reach out to the "rank and file autoworkers, to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the unions, build rank and file committees connected to the communities. There should be a national strike, there should be a cross-border strike, there should be a general strike," he said, concluding, that "These plants belong to the workers, not to the billionaires."

The Hamtramck meeting and the statements of the SEP representative were widely reported in the local Detroit news media, which recognizes that the SEP is the only political force organizing opposition to the plant closings. The *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* and the Steering Committee of the Coalition of Rank-and-File Committees organized a February 9 demonstration in front of GM's Detroit headquarters, which called for workers to organize rank-and-file factory committees, independent of the UAW, to unite US, Canadian and Mexican workers in a common fight against plant closings, layoffs and new concession demands.

The SEP is fighting to fuse an industrial counteroffensive by the working class with an international socialist strategy in opposition to both corporate-controlled parties. This includes the fight to transform the giant corporations and banks into public enterprises, collectively owned and democratically controlled by the working class.

We urge workers to subscribe and support the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* to take up this fight.



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