

“The UAW sold us down the river”

Fiat Chrysler uses robocall to announce more layoffs at Belvidere, Illinois, plant

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On Monday, Fiat Chrysler Automobiles (FCA) announced via an automated phone call that it would lay off an additional 32 autoworkers at its Belvidere Assembly Plant in northern Illinois. Nearly 1,400 workers were laid off when FCA eliminated the “C” shift over the weekend and workers have reported rumors that hundreds more layoffs may be coming later this summer.

The cuts are part of the ongoing global jobs massacre by Fiat Chrysler and the other auto giants, with the collaboration of the United Auto Workers (UAW) union. In March, FCA announced it would also eliminate an entire shift, roughly 1,500 jobs, at its assembly plant in Windsor, Ontario, just across the border from Detroit in Canada.

Last December, General Motors initiated the jobs bloodbath when it announced plans to lay off over 14,000 workers and close five plants in the US and Canada. The company is closing a transmission plant in Baltimore, Maryland this week, after shutting its Lordstown, Ohio assembly plant in March. In an April 30 filing with the US Securities and Exchange Commission GM signaled more job cuts were coming, “We may execute additional initiatives in the future, if necessary, to streamline manufacturing capacity and reduce other costs to improve the utilization of remaining facilities.”

Speaking to the *Chicago Tribune*, industry analyst Michelle Krebs indicated that the job cuts at Belvidere assembly may only be the prelude to the complete shutdown of the plant. “One disadvantage a plant like Belvidere has is it’s kind of out of the way from all the other plants,” Krebs said to the *Tribune*. Following the layoffs at Belvidere, FCA claims it will build a \$4.5 billion assembly plant in Detroit, retool five other plants and allegedly create 5,000 jobs in a move to consolidate production of highly profitable Jeeps and pickups in the

Detroit area.

The auto companies are counting on the collusion of the UAW to cut jobs and use the threat of mass layoffs as a hammer to extract even deeper concessions from workers in the new four-year contracts being negotiated this summer. FCA is swimming in cash, having made \$8.16 billion in pre-tax profits in 2018. Increased employment at any plants is dependent not only new concessions promised by the UAW but millions in tax cuts and other incentives. Democrats who control Detroit’s city government and the Michigan governor’s seat have offered FCA more than \$100 million in contributions for land purchases, and the company is seeking even more in tax cuts.

“I’m hearing from our illustrious union that FCA is basically forcing us to go work in Toledo [Ohio], if we don’t, they’ll cut our unemployment and benefits,” said John, a second-tier worker furious at the layoffs. “We hear there are 400 plus or minus TPT [temporary part-time] employees at Toledo and they’re going to replace them with us.”

Workers at the Belvidere plant, first opened in 1965, have endured a series of attacks on their jobs and livelihoods over the last two decades. After the 2008-2009 financial crisis, Chrysler declared bankruptcy and decimated the workforce at the plant, reducing the employee count to a skeleton crew of nearly 200 workers.

Following the bankruptcy of Chrysler and General Motors, thousands of low-paying second-tier jobs were added with the assistance of the UAW, as part of Wall Street’s restructuring of the entire auto industry overseen by the Obama administration. Autoworkers saw their living standards slashed in half overnight after the auto bailouts, as poverty wages were foisted on newer workers and wages were essentially frozen for older workers.

The recently eliminated third shift at Belvidere was added in 2012 to great fanfare by the ruthless cost-cutter Sergio Marchionne, who famously said that US autoworkers must accept a “culture of poverty” instead of a “culture of entitlement.”

In 2015, Fiat Chrysler workers rejected the first sellout deal brought back by the UAW and a second proposal was only ratified after a campaign of lies and intimidation. It has since been revealed that top UAW negotiators, including former union vice president Norwood Jewell were being bribed by FCA executives to sign pro-company deals.

In 2017, production of the Jeep Cherokee was moved to Belvidere Assembly after workers were laid off that year at FCA Toledo Assembly. Until recently, over 5,131 hourly workers and 333 salaried workers worked at the plant.

For workers in Belvidere, located 75 miles northwest of Chicago, as well as the surrounding economically-depressed region of the Rockford metropolitan area, the job cuts will be devastating. Ripple effects are expected throughout the region as parts suppliers to FCA’s Belvidere assembly are expected to cut more than 320 jobs.

Asked about his thoughts on the situation, John responded angrily, asking if a reporter wanted to know “how the UAW sold us down the river?”

“They aren’t obeying their own contract. They are doing absolutely nothing for us during this layoff. People that are keeping their jobs are also mad because the UAW isn’t honoring seniority when it comes to bidding on jobs. They aren’t letting seniority employees bump. So, the entire plant is dumbfounded because it feels we have nowhere to turn, nobody to back us up on any front.

“Almost every person who negotiated the 2015 contract has pleaded guilty to bribery, conspiracy, etc.,” John added. “That contract should be null and void. Instead, they just make it more blatant that they are outright stealing from us, and what are we going to do?”

“I can’t support my household by being a Walmart greeter.”

Speaking of the explosive social tensions building up in the United States and internationally, John stated, “The entire state of this country with the class separation is going to end up in another ‘yellow vest’ demonstration. This is an absolute joke and our so-called leaders (politicians) are to blame. They are bought and paid for by Big Pharma, oil and Wall Street.”

Another worker with four years at the plant said about

the WSWS’ initial report on the layoffs, “The article is exactly what I’m thinking. It’s ridiculous how it’s all going down.” The layoffs are “definitely gonna be used as bargaining chip,” he continued. “It’s all a game for them. And we are a pawn.”

Last month, the same worker blasted the UAW for its silence on the attack on jobs. “Not a word,” he said of the UAW’s response to the job cuts. “Miraculously, our union steward had scheduled time off. I’m sure he knew it was coming.”

The worker grew up in the Rockford area and described the challenges as a young worker in the economically depressed Rustbelt region. “Born and raised since 1990,” he said. “It’s a struggle really. [There’s] not many good jobs. Chrysler is the best job in the area. Housing is high. Rent is high. This cutting of a shift is going to be tough for a lot of people.”

The jobs bloodletting must be stopped! Everything depends on workers themselves taking the initiative. In order to stop the job cuts, workers at Belvidere should act without delay to hold meetings and form a rank-and-file committee independent of the UAW. An urgent appeal must be made to the thousands of GM workers who have been laid off, along with the tens of thousands of autoworkers in Canada and Mexico who are facing brutal attacks by the same giant transnational corporations, to prepare a national and cross-border strike to defend jobs and oppose all concessions.

The WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* will do everything possible to help workers build the opposition to plant closings and layoffs. We urge those who want to join this fight to contact us today.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact