GM workers denounce deals to “save” token jobs in Lordstown and Oshawa

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Amid much fanfare, this week General Motors and the Unifor union in Canada announced deals to maintain token operations at the company’s Oshawa, Ontario assembly plant that is slated to close later this year, throwing 2,600 out of work. Simultaneously GM revealed that it is planning to sell its Lordstown, Ohio assembly plant that it shuttered in March. The move was hailed by President Trump.

The Oshawa and Lordstown closures are part of a restructuring plan announced last December that included the closure of five GM factories in North America and the elimination of some 14,000 salaried and production jobs.

The deal to continue production at the Oshawa facility involves turning it into a parts manufacturing operation employing about 300 workers as well as an expansion of its Canadian Technical Centre. It also contains certain money for “retraining” and buyouts. At its peak, the facility employed over 20,000 production workers.

At a joint press conference, Unifor President Jerry Dias gave his blessing to the deal, in effect formally dropping any pretense of fighting to save the jobs of the remaining workers threatened with layoff. The Unifor head had engaged in demagogic tub thumping over the Oshawa closure, including launching a multimillion-dollar ad campaign denouncing GM management, along with a filthy chauvinist campaign blaming Mexican workers for taking “Canadian” jobs.

In a cynical and groveling statement, Dias declared, “By maintaining a footprint in Oshawa, and keeping the plant intact, we save hundreds of jobs and this gives us the ability to build and create new jobs in the future. We are in a much better position than we were five months ago when the plant was closing.”

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau also praised the announcement.

Also, on Wednesday, GM announced plans to sell its Lordstown plant to electric truck manufacturer Workhorse. What, if any, jobs the venture will create is open to speculation, especially given that the company has no experience in manufacturing operations, currently employs fewer than 100 people and reported $36.5 million in losses for 2018.

This did not stop Trump from hailing the announcement. In a tweet he boasted, “I have been working nicely with GM to get this done. With all the car companies coming back, and much more. The USA is booming!”

Earlier this month GM closed its Baltimore powertrain plant, axing some 300 jobs. Fiat Chrysler, meanwhile, has carried out the permanent layoff of 1,400 workers at its Belvidere, Illinois assembly plant and scheduled the elimination of a shift in September at its Windsor, Ontario plant.

Workers at both the Lordstown and Oshawa plants were quick to denounce the deals. At a mass meeting called by Unifor Thursday to explain details of the agreement, many workers walked out. “We should burn the plant down and piss on it,” one angry Oshawa worker told *CityNews*.

A young summer worker at Oshawa told local media, “I have family that work here; it’s a struggle. To be swept under the rug with only 300 jobs, it sucks.”

Mike, a veteran worker from the Lordstown plant told the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*, “This was all planned. They want to scare the older workers out and come back with another company paying one half the wages with no pensions or benefits.

“They would not sell the plant to a competitor. I am sure GM has a stake in it. They will get tax abatements and get contracts from the post office and Amazon” for building electric vehicles.

He said the sale of the plant meant that workers who had turned down transfers with the hope of still being recalled if the Lordstown plant reopened were being

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thrown under the bus.

The UAW issued a perfunctory criticism of the plan to sell the Lordstown plant and says it will still to seek press GM to keep the Lordstown plant open in the 2019 national contract negotiations. In 2010, however, the UAW sought to blackmail workers at GM's Indianapolis Stamping Plant into accepting a 50 percent pay cut in order to lure a new owner to buy the plant.

Mike said he suspected that the UAW was in on the Lordstown plan and would be willing to unionize the lower-paid workers under a new owner. "They are only worried about one thing: collecting dues. They are not giving people justice."

He pointed out that workers who decline involuntary transfers to other plants lose their health care and other benefits and any further transfer rights.

Another laid off Lordstown worker said, "I don't know what will happen. I don't want to move, my whole life has been here, my family is here. I have enough years to retire, but I'm not old enough. I need to have health care.

"This was the last good job in the area. Everything else is just low-pay; people can't live on this. The whole system has to be changed—all they care about is the rich."

Mike continued, "GM is disrupting everyone's lives. They send you a letter telling you to take a transfer or your benefits will be cut off. If there are family issues, parents with cancer, they don't care about that. You have x number of days to respond, or you are done. All they are worried about is their bottom line."

According to a recent report in the *Detroit Free Press*, 1,500 GM workers at the affected US plants have not been relocated to other jobs. About 1,300 had been sent to other plants including 593 workers from the Detroit-Hamtramck plant, 670 from Lordstown and another 42 from transmission operations. Some had been transferred to plants as far away as Arlington, Texas and Wentzville, Missouri.

According to the report, GM sent out 490 involuntary requests for the Wentzville plant and got 150 workers from Lordstown to take the transfers.

In addition to the hardship imposed on GM workers, the plant closures will have a wide economic impact. A study by the Center for Economic Development at Cleveland State University estimated the closure of the Lordstown plant would cause the loss of some 8,000 jobs and lower overall economic activity by $8 billion in the regional economy.

The city of Hamtramck, Michigan anticipates the loss of $800,000 from its annual budget and $115,000 from its School Aid Fund, not taking into account the impact on businesses and falling home values.

GM's claim that its plans for Oshawa will save 300 jobs is also dubious. The company says it will convert the Oshawa plant to operations focused on stamping, related sub-assembly, and other miscellaneous activities for GM and other auto industry customers. Some of the supposedly "saved" jobs are tied to operations at the Detroit-Hamtramck plant, which is slated to close next January.

Workers in the US and Canada should reject the crumbs offered by GM and launch a united fight to defend jobs and oppose all concession demands. This requires waging a struggle independent of Unifor and the UAW through the building of rank-and-file factory committees. It requires a rejection of the anti-Mexican and anti-Chinese demagogy of the UAW and Unifor and forging a joint strategy of workers in the US, Canada, Mexico and internationally against the transnational auto companies.

Autoworkers must reach out to other sections of the working class coming into struggle, including teachers, hospital workers and other service workers as well as workers in telecommunications, manufacturing and transport. This means rejecting the phony claims of big-business politicians from Trudeau to Trump, defenders of the rich, that they are concerned with workers' jobs. Workers must carry out an independent political struggle, mobilizing the broadest sections of workers, the youth and unemployed behind their fight.

Workers must insist that workers' jobs and livelihood take precedence over the profit requirements of the billionaires. This means a challenge to the capitalist profit system and the dominance over society by a super-wealthy ruling elite and the reorganization of production on a rational basis to meet human needs, in other words the fight for socialism.

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