

Laid-off FCA Belvidere autoworkers, abandoned by UAW, told to uproot

Jacob Crosse and Marcus Day
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Following February's announcement that Fiat Chrysler Automobiles (FCA) would be eliminating an entire shift at its Belvidere, Illinois, assembly plant, workers have reported to the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* that they have been given just a few weeks to decide if they would be willing to transfer hundreds of miles away. More than 1,400 workers at the plant, located roughly 75 miles northwest of Chicago, have been laid off since the beginning of May.

"People got offered a transfer to Toledo [Ohio], and when the possibility first arose around the time the layoff was announced, they originally said the people would have 60 days to decide," said "Chris," a worker at the plant. Initially informed they would be given approximately two months to decide whether to accept new positions, some workers have subsequently been given an ultimatum to accept a move and report in as little as two weeks.

"Some people received their official letter the 5th [of July], 6th, and the last people received their certified letter the 8th," he said. "And the letter said that they must report to Toledo by the 22nd."

He said that those offered the transfer have been told they will lose unemployment benefits either way on July 22. "Unemployment will end no matter what. If you go, you found work and you lose your benefits obviously. But if you do deny it, you turned down work and you have no more unemployment benefits.

"And they think they're slick, contract time is a couple months away, which means sign-on bonuses. People who are laid off, and have call back rights, technically are still a part of the company and would get the sign-on bonus. But what they're doing is, they are going to offer people jobs and hope the majority of them turn them down, in hopes they'll get them off the books for the sign-on bonus."

John, a laid-off ~~Autoworker~~ *Autoworker* told the *Newsletter* that only 100 have thus far been offered positions at Toledo Jeep. "How does a person that has prior commitments to their geographical area just 'uproot' and leave?" he asked.

The United Auto Workers (UAW) union has done nothing to mobilize workers in a fight against the layoffs. On the contrary, the UAW has worked with the companies to keep workers in the dark about the layoffs as long as possible, seeking to block a struggle against job cuts throughout the auto industry, as it has done at General Motor's Lordstown, Ohio, and Detroit plants in recent months, and at countless plants before that over the last four decades.

When FCA first officially revealed the layoffs at Belvidere—which had been suspected for months by workers—it sought to overshadow the news by announcing plans for multibillion-dollar investments in Detroit-area plants, including the conversion of the shuttered Mack Avenue Engine facility into a new assembly plant.

The UAW took the lead from the company's communications department, saying nothing about the layoffs in Belvidere. Instead, a press release was issued in which UAW Vice President for FCA Cindy Estrada lavished praise on Chrysler, calling the promises of jobs in Detroit "great news" and "a reward." At the same time, Estrada sought to whip up nationalist resentment of workers in Mexico, China and Korea.

While some workers face a looming deadline, others are being strung along with the possibility of getting "first dibs" on jobs at Chrysler's future factory at the Mack Avenue Engine site. However, production at that plant is not projected to begin until the end of 2020, leaving many workers in uncertainty for months, if not longer.

Estrada and the UAW are looking to cut labor costs for the automakers by weeding out veteran workers and hope to fill the promised jobs at the uncompleted FCA assembly plant in Detroit—should they ever fully materialize—with primarily temporary part-time workers with little benefits, low wages, and virtually no job protections. This is part of a global strategy of the auto bosses: the destruction of good-paying, secure jobs, to be replaced with precarious or part-time employment, similar to hyper-exploited migrant workers or Uber and Lyft drivers in the so-called “gig economy.”

Commenting recently to the *Detroit Free Press*, Estrada noted, “Contractually when we have a layoff, workers have the opportunity to move to another plant.”

With obvious indifference at the impossible situation laid-off workers are facing, she continued, “I can’t imagine they all want to come.”

Nor has UAW Local 1268 at Belvidere lifted a finger to defend the jobs of workers. “People are getting no answers from George [Welitschinsky, Local 1268 president],” John said. “They are all getting the boilerplate statement ‘we’ll look into it.’”

As the *Autoworker Newsletter* wrote at the time the layoffs were first announced in February, “Both the promises of investment in Detroit and the job cuts at Belvidere will be held up by FCA and the UAW as the proverbial ‘carrot and stick’ in the run-up to the expiration of its contract in September this year,” in order to blackmail workers to accept new concessions.

The layoffs in Belvidere are part of a global assault on autoworkers, with FCA also planning the elimination of an entire shift at its Windsor, Ontario, plant in Canada later this year. The job cuts in Belvidere themselves may portend the eventual shutdown of the plant, with industry analysts speculating whether FCA may be seeking to consolidate production to the Detroit area.

According to *Bloomberg*, as of May 2019 major automakers had already carried out the destruction of 38,000 jobs. This includes not only factory workers, but 7,000 white-collar Ford workers. And just as workers in the US have watched as the UAW has done nothing to prevent these layoffs, their counterparts in Brazil, Mexico, Germany, China, Canada and the UK have seen the trade unions in those countries play the same role.

“This almost seems like slavery, as if they own you,” John said. “How in the world do they expect you to make a life-changing decision and uproot in 22 days?”

The only way jobs can be defended is if workers take matters out of the hands of the UAW and begin forming rank-and-file committees to assert their rights to good-paying jobs, health care, retirement, and more.

The global restructuring of the auto industry, and the accompanying jobs massacre that is well under way, must be fought against on an international scale. Autoworkers must link up with their class brothers and sisters in North America, Europe, South America and Asia to prepare a global fight back against the auto companies.

On Thursday, July 18, the WSWWS Autoworker Newsletter is hosting an online conference call to discuss a fighting program for the 2019 contracts, and the strategy needed to oppose layoffs and concessions. We encourage all autoworkers to attend.



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