

Ford in Canada announces 200 layoffs at Oakville assembly plant

More layoffs threatened for January

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25 July 2019

Ford announced last week that it will lay off about 200 workers at its Oakville, Ontario assembly plant effective this September. Additionally, it warned that further job reductions could be made this coming January due to continued weakness in the auto sales market. The September layoffs combined with the threat for more cuts in early 2020 are the opening shots by the corporation in its attempt to intimidate workers in next year's contract fight.

In justifying the layoffs, Ford cited their "long-standing practice of matching production with consumer demand... We are changing from tag relief to mass relief in final assembly, which means the line will now stop during breaks. We are also eliminating one shift in paint, bringing that area of the plant to two shifts, affecting approximately 200 jobs."

With a current workforce of 4,600 employees at the Oakville plant, the company produces the Ford Flex, Ford Edge, Lincoln MKT and the Nautilus.

The global auto firms are positioning themselves for a significant economic downturn in the coming years. Ford has announced that 12,000 production jobs will be cut in 2020 in its European operations. In addition, the company is currently in the process of slashing its global salaried workforce by 70,000 by the end of next month. Ford CEO James Hackett, whose personal compensation rose six percent to almost \$18 million last year, calls the job cutting program, Ford's "Smart Redesign."

Dave Thomas, the local Unifor president at the Oakville plant, immediately bowed to last week's job cuts announcement, issuing a letter to the membership stating, "We have been arguing as a Local for the past several weeks trying to persuade the company from

somehow avoiding this scenario but to no avail. As always, it's based on a business decision and it all comes down to dollars and cents."

In fact, Unifor has offered no opposition to any of the massive job cuts announced this year. In their response to the April layoff announcement of 1,500 Fiat-Chrysler Windsor Assembly workers effective in September and last November's announcement of the closure of the Oshawa GM plant, union officials claimed to have been blindsided. As in the case of the Unifor response to the Oakville layoffs, Windsor Local 444 President Dave Cassidy downplayed the announced layoffs, calling the cuts "strictly a business decision based on the Pacifica."

At General Motors Oshawa, after a few months of bluster and a foul nationalist campaign targeting Mexican workers, Unifor President Jerry Dias accepted the loss of 2,300 assembly jobs (and another 2,500 auto parts jobs) in exchange for a dubious promise of a maximum of 300 parts stamping positions.

For decades the Unifor and its forerunner the Canadian Auto Workers union have collaborated in the destruction of living standards in the name of saving "Canadian jobs." The reality is that this policy has not saved a single job. Instead, the auto union has overseen a more-than 50 percent reduction in the number of hourly workers at the Detroit automakers in Canada since 2001. Since government bailout money was dispensed in 2009, another 7,000 autoworkers (including the recent layoff announcements) have lost their jobs at GM and Chrysler.

Autoworkers at Ford Oakville will be entirely familiar with this lesson. In the 2016 contract fight, in the face of worker opposition to the two tier system,

Jerry Dias brought forward a “framework pattern agreement.” Dias had negotiated yet another concessions deal with the empty promise that the contract would guarantee the current auto footprint in Canada.

With opposition among Ford workers mounting, Ford Windsor union president Chris Taylor then played the union’s “fear card”: “The implications of demanding more than the pattern agreement,” wrote Taylor, “have been clearly laid out by Ford. The company is stating that it will not do business in a jurisdiction where the company is paying more than its competitors. Ford has gone further to say that if there is a strike based on wanting more than the pattern economics it will reconsider their Canadian facilities and exit Canadian operations. This is not something that the leadership at any level has the right to risk.”

In bold type, the statement warned, “Your bargaining committee has made it clear that we will not allow our livelihoods and the future of jobs to be put at risk.” Thusly, Unifor, squarely in the tradition of the Detroit Three companies over the decades, once again nakedly took up the cudgels for management, seeking to whip-saw one plant against another, divide the membership and signal that they would adamantly oppose strike action.

When workers refused to be intimidated and the ratification meeting at Ford Oakville erupted in anger at Dias and the union leadership, the Unifor president resorted to threats of plant shutdowns. At the meeting, local president Dave Thomas reversed himself and fell into line behind Dias’ deal. Then, in a self-exposure of Unifor’s role as company shills, Dias warned that if Ford workers voted down the deal and went on strike, Ford would move production from Oakville to China. In the end, Ford Oakville workers voted down the contract by 55 percent, but due to votes at Ford Windsor (which had been threatened with plant closure) the agreement barely passed.

It has been repeatedly demonstrated that concessions do not defend jobs. That is shown by the closure of the GM Oshawa plant. At Ford, deep concessions at the company’s St. Thomas assembly facility combined with investment in a new paint shop did not prevent a wholesale shutdown in 2011.

The attack on jobs is taking place on both sides of the US-Canadian border. GM carried out the shutdown of

its historic Lordstown Assembly plant in March and has slated closure of its Detroit-Hamtramck facility for January 2020. Fiat Chrysler has, meanwhile, carried out the layoff of the second shift at its Belvidere, Illinois plant.

Contracts for autoworkers in the United States come up for renewal in September. The United Auto Workers is preparing once again to ram through the sweeping concessions demanded by the auto bosses in the name of saving jobs. In opposition to the nationalist, divide and conquer strategy of Unifor and the UAW, Canadian and US autoworkers must join with their brother workers in Mexico to launch a common fight in defense of jobs and against concessions.

They must unite to organize rank-and-file factory committees, independent of Unifor and the UAW, to mount a counter-offensive against the auto bosses. Lines of communication must be established between workers in different plants. These committees should issue an urgent appeal for a joint struggle by 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. In the place of the anti-foreigner nationalism promoted by the unions, workers must advance a program of international solidarity based on the fight for socialism.



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