As US GM strike continues

Layoffs mount in Canadian auto industry

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Over 6,000 Canadian auto assembly and parts workers, organized by Unifor, have been temporarily laid off as a result of the ongoing strike by 48,000 American United Auto Worker (UAW) members against General Motors. The layoffs include 2,100 workers at GM's soon-to-close Oshawa assembly complex and most of the 1,100 workers at the company's St. Catharines engine plant. Thousands more auto parts workers who supply these facilities and GM plants in the United States also have been laid off.

Industry analysts say the vast majority of GM's North American supplier plants will have to adjust production. Citigroup, in a note to investors, said Canadian-based Magna, American Axle, Lear and Aptiv are suppliers that will be most affected by the strike. GM has also laid off workers at its transmission plant in Silao, Mexico. Workers at the adjacent assembly plant have defied firings and victimizations by GM and the company-controlled union and refused to increase production during the strike.

GM's CAMI plant in Ingersoll, Ontario, although not directly impacted by the strike to date, began a week-long shutdown Monday that had been previously scheduled by GM last August. The several hundred workers that had remained on the job at the St. Catharines plant to supply CAMI have now been laid off as well. The company has projected several more shutdowns in Ingersoll over the ensuing months due to slumping sales. CAMI produces the Equinox SUV, which is also assembled in San Luis Potosi, Mexico. When GM announced that it will permanently end the third shift in San Luis Potosi, Unifor officials, true to their nationalist orientation, hailed the decision.

The US strike is a component of an international resurgence of class struggle. American autoworkers are now in the forefront of a global counteroffensive by workers against poverty, inequality, concessions and job losses. Whatever pattern contract is ultimately settled in the United States will affect negotiations in Canada in 2020. In the face of this, Unifor president Jerry Dias told reporters that a strike in Canada next year "may very well" occur and issued a perfunctory statement expressing "solidarity" with the US GM strike. That "solidarity" took the form of a small delegation of Unifor officials from Windsor, Ontario delivering several boxes of donuts to GM pickets in Detroit.

This token gesture by Unifor in support of GM strikers stands in stark contrast to the heroic actions of GM workers in Silao, Mexico, who face company reprisals for their stand in support of their US brothers.

Unifor's hostility and indifference to the largest and longest strike in the North American auto industry for decades is of a piece with the union's foul history of pitting Canadian workers against their class brothers and sisters in the United States, Mexico and across the globe. Only a few weeks before the US strike, with contracts for over 150,000 American autoworkers in the Detroit Three set to expire, Unifor held its national convention, without so much as mentioning the ongoing contract struggle in the US.

The reactionary nationalism spewed by Unifor and the UAW goes hand in hand with their total rejection of the class struggle and embrace of the program of corporatist union management collaboration. In practice, this means imposing endless concessions in the name of boosting the profits and profitability of the national auto industry against overseas rivals.

When GM announced its plan to close its Oshawa plant and four US-based facilities last November, Dias met with UAW president Gary Jones and agreed that "serious, serious tariffs" must be imposed on Mexican

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auto exports. Dias had barely returned to Canada when Jones quickly dispensed with his professed solidarity with Canadian autoworkers and, echoing President Trump, called on “patriotic consumers” to say ‘No’ to American companies that choose foreign workers over American workers.

Jones said nothing about the Oshawa closure or the fact that GM can find cheaper labour not only in Mexico but also in the US due to decades of UAW givebacks that have reduced labour costs below those in Canada. For their own part, Unifor and its previous incarnation as the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) has responded to the whipsawing of jobs and wages back and forth across borders by ramming through its own pro-company concessions contracts.

A month after his meeting with the UAW, Dias, after suppressing calls for wildcat strike action in Oshawa against the upcoming closure, launched a nationalist campaign that called on Canadian consumers to boycott any GM product assembled in Mexico. The anti-Mexican campaign was launched as more than 70,000 maquiladora workers in Matamoros, Mexico, were conducting a courageous strike against transnational auto parts companies and corrupt unions.

The divisive content of nationalism was laid bare in the 2017 month-long strike at GM’s CAMI assembly plant. During contract talks, Unifor’s sole demand was that GM designate CAMI as the “lead producer” of the Equinox. The union proposed that if jobs had to be shed due to a downturn in auto sales, workers in two Mexican plants should be laid off first. When the struggle was in its fourth week, GM management threatened to close the plant and ramp up production in Mexico unless the strike was halted.

Less than a day later, Unifor wound up the strike by imposing virtually the same concessions-laden contract offered to the workers at the Detroit Three operations across Canada in 2016. Under conditions where GM, a transnational company with platforms in 31 countries, produces the same Equinox model manufactured at CAMI in Spring Hill, Tennessee and Ramos Arizpe and San Luis Potosi, Mexico, the nationalist program promoted by Unifor left autoworkers defenseless against company threats to move production southward.

This strategy has failed to save a single job, either in Canada or the US. Instead, it has played directly into the hands of the auto bosses, who took advantage of the globalization of production to shift factories to the location with the lowest bidder in terms of labour costs.

The appeal for the international unity of the working class is not a holiday phrase—it is a strategic necessity and the basis for unleashing the immense social strength of the working class. This is objectively shown in the very production process itself. A vehicle that rolls off the assembly line in Mexico, Canada or the United States is comprised of parts that have crossed national boundaries up to a dozen times.

Canadian autoworkers must reject the nationalist program of Unifor. To do this, they should seize the initiative by establishing rank-and-file committees to take their struggle against plant closures and more concessions out of the hands of the Unifor bureaucrats. These committees should immediately declare their support for a common fight with autoworkers in the US and Mexico and internationally in order to overturn the decades of givebacks and secure decent-paying permanent jobs for all.

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