

Workers left to scramble as GM closes Detroit Hamtramck plant for 18-month retooling

Shannon Jones
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The last vehicle rolled off the assembly line last Thursday as General Motors suspended production at its Detroit-Hamtramck Assembly Plant. Some 800 workers are being displaced by the move that GM says is necessary while it retools the facility for the production of electric vehicles, with the facility reopening sometime in late 2021.

The plant built the Chevrolet Impala, Cadillac CT6 and Chevrolet Volt. GM is killing all those models as it restructures production and cuts costs. The projected facility will build a new GMC Hummer, an electric pickup and the self-driving Cruise Origin electric vehicle. GM claims that the retooled plant when fully operational will employ 2,200. That figure is not at all for sure as the demand for the new electric vehicles is highly uncertain, along with the economic situation over the next two years.

The United Auto Workers claimed it “saved” the Detroit-Hamtramck plant, also known as “D-Ham,” in the 2019 contract negotiations. The facility was one of five plants in North America GM planned to shutter in an aggressive cost cutting move. The other facilities were the Oshawa, Ontario, Assembly Plant, the Lordstown, Ohio, Assembly plant and transmission plants in Warren, Michigan, and Baltimore County, Maryland, which have all been shuttered with the collusion of the UAW and its Canadian counterpart, the Unifor union.

Any jobs that were “saved” at D-Ham were paid for by autoworkers through inadequate pay increases and the expanded use by management of temporary and part-time workers who face brutal conditions and earn substandard pay and benefits. In other factories designated to build electric vehicles, including Lordstown and the Orion plant, north of Detroit, the UAW signed secret memoranda of agreement, which

added additional tiers of low-paid contract workers.

The 800 hourly and salaried workers at the plant are being forced to take early retirement or transfer to maintain employment. Some are going to GM Flint Assembly 50 miles to the north and others are being forced to move to facilities such as the Lansing Delta Township plant, 90 miles away, or the Fort Wayne, Indiana, Assembly Plant, 160 miles away. Temporary part-time workers (TPT) are not eligible to transfer and may not even be eligible for unemployment benefits.

GM said last week that it is adding shifts this spring at its two Lansing, Michigan, facilities, with a reported 1,200 additional jobs. It is not clear how many workers will be hired off the street and how many of those will be transfers from shuttered facilities. The Delta Township plant builds Chevrolet Traverse and Buick Enclave SUVs. Lansing Grand River builds the Chevrolet Camaro and the Cadillac CT4 and CT5 sedans.

As the Detroit-Hamtramck plant closed GM continued to hype its plans for a new battery plant near the now closed Lordstown facility. The new plant will only employ 1,100 workers, a fraction of those formerly employed at Lordstown Assembly. It is not expected to open until 2022. When it does workers will be paid \$15–17 an hour, considerably less than regular GM employees.

Despite this, the city of Lordstown capitulated to GM blackmail and approved a 75 percent property tax abatement for the new battery plant, representing a considerable bite out of its local property tax revenue that is needed to fund schools and other vital services. The batteries would be used to power vehicles assembled at the Detroit-Hamtramck plant.

The closing of the Detroit-Hamtramck plant has created stress for many workers who face the hard

choice of accepting layoff or possibly uprooting and relocating to another facility. The *Detroit News* interviewed one nine-year veteran worker who had just bought a house outside of Detroit who said he wasn't willing to sell his house or to drive to plants more than one hour away in Flint or Lansing.

A temporary part-time worker at the Detroit-Hamtramck plant told the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*, "There is no language for TPT workers who just started there and we will just be laid off.

"If you have work credits because you worked at another job you may be eligible to collect unemployment benefits from the state. Otherwise you get nothing. It takes at least six months of working to be eligible for unemployment benefits. There has to be hundreds of TPTs who are affected."

He also spoke about the impact on veteran workers. "A lot of the full-time employees have been offered buyouts, but many have said what GM is offering is not enough after having put in all those years to get where they are. Many have kids in college and other major expenses."

While the UAW has claimed it defended jobs by securing a new product at the Detroit-Hamtramck facility, workers forced to relocate while GM retools the plant will displace temporary workers at other facilities. This was underscored by GM's decision to fire 240 temporary workers at its Fort Wayne Assembly Plant in January rather than promote them to full-time status. Their jobs are likely to be taken by displaced Detroit-Hamtramck workers.

GM has been using forced overtime at many plants, including the Flint Truck Plant, to make up production lost during the strike. Fifty-hour workweeks are not unusual, making the 40-hour week a thing of the past.

The TPT worker debunked the UAW's claims that it won a great "victory" during the 40-day GM strike by establishing a so-called path to full-time status for temporary workers. Under the terms of the new contract, part-time workers must work three consecutive years without interruption to be rolled over to a full-time position. If the worker is laid off for more than 30 days, the clock starts all over again.

"I know the strike was BS," he told the *Autoworker Newsletter*. "They only did it because of the corruption scandal. How can you strike GM and let the other

plants operate? It was a game. All the (Big Three) plants should walk.

"We struck 40 days and they still made record profits. A lot of people are upset.

"You have [TPTs] with 2 years in 2018 who did not come back until 2019 and had to start all over [accumulating seniority]. A guy who was working with me had two years, and they laid him off. They had even given him accolades about his attendance.

"The UAW is with management. They are playing off the lower-seniority workers against the senior workers. They won't tell the younger workers anything [about their rights]. The company knows that, and they don't want older workers to tell the younger workers anything."

For example, the worker noted, "There is no language in the contract making Sunday a mandatory workday, but younger workers feel they have no choice but to come in."

As far as the pay, he said, "A lot of people work other jobs to supplement their income because they don't earn enough. You make \$15 an hour and are getting an 84 cent raise, that's ridiculous!"



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