

Fiat Chrysler to lay off 1,500 Windsor Assembly workers in June

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Fiat Chrysler Automobiles (FCA) announced last week that on June 29 the third shift at its Windsor, Ontario assembly plant will be eliminated resulting in the permanent layoff of 1,500 workers.

“This decision comes as the Company works to align volumes with demand while phasing out production of the Dodge Grand Caravan at the end of May,” said an FCA statement. Production of the Grand Caravan will end on May 22. A “transition period” will then begin to consolidate a two-shift operation by the end of June.

The job cuts will have an immediate knock-on effect in the city’s auto parts sector. Already, it is expected that local FCA suppliers Flex-N-Gate and Syncreon will shed at least 200 jobs due to the Chrysler retrenchment.

The Windsor plant, which builds the Chrysler Pacifica minivan, Pacifica Hybrid, Grand Caravan and Chrysler Voyager, has operated on a three-shift schedule since 1993. The plant is the largest employer in Windsor, which has been devastated by a steady reduction of auto production in the city, once called the automotive capital of Canada. There are about 6,000 workers currently employed at the Windsor plant, which underwent retooling in 2015 to build the Pacifica. The plant can build up to 1,500 vehicles per day.

The announcement of a final layoff date had been expected by autoworkers at the plant for some time. FCA had initially indicated its plans to end the third shift last March but had delayed issuing a conclusive end date as it calibrated production volumes with the plummeting sales figures of its Grand Caravan and Pacifica models. Sales numbers for the facility’s main product, the Chrysler Pacifica, have steadily declined in recent years. Last year purchases of the model dropped by 17 percent in the vital US market and by 38 percent

in Canada. Sales of the Grand Caravan were down by 19 percent in the US and by 15 percent in Canada.

Unifor president Jerry Dias once again trotted out his increasingly threadbare beggar-thy-neighbour trade war “solution” to the decimation of auto jobs in Canada. “Every country in the world that has a major auto industry has a national strategy to preserve the jobs,” said Dias. “I take a look at Germany. I take a look at Japan. I take a look at Korea. I take a look at the different nations around the world.”

Dias, once again, is peddling nothing but nationalist snake-oil. The FCA announcement is only the latest in a string of far-reaching international assembly layoffs, which reflect a global jobs blood-bath in the auto industry as a result of deepening capitalist crisis. More than 500,000 jobs were destroyed last year in Europe, Asia and North America. Analysts expect job losses to increase over the course of 2020. More than 100,000 auto assembly layoffs were already planned by companies worldwide in year end announcements. Hundreds of thousands of related auto parts jobs will also be slashed.

Aware of the growing rank-and-file opposition to Unifor’s prostration before the auto companies, Unifor Local 444 president Dave Cassidy deemed it necessary to appeal to his membership to “trust your union.” Indeed Unifor (and its predecessor Canadian Auto Workers union) have presided over a decades-long policy of imposing brutal concessions contracts for phony job saving agreements. But the end of the third shift at Windsor FCA, 650 recent layoffs at Ford Oakville and the closure of assembly production at GM Oshawa last year are just the latest in a series of job cuts that includes the devastating 2010 mothballing of Windsor’s GM Transmission operation.

In November the Ontario Labour Relations Board

ruled that Nemark could close its Windsor auto parts plant in 2020. Unifor claimed the early closure violated terms of a concessions agreement it signed in 2020. Unifor had shut down a two week strike by 180 Nemark workers last September against the closure threat and told workers to put their faith in arbitration instead with predictably disastrous results.

One veteran FCA Windsor worker told the *World Socialist Web Site* that workers had no confidence in Dias. “This was inevitable. I knew it was going to happen regardless of whatever Unifor did. We are phasing out the Grand Caravan on May 22 and are going down to two shifts by then. All the people are staying until June 29. I imagine it is to try and avoid chaos.”

It can hardly be a coincidence that the Windsor layoffs are timed to take effect in June, the same month that FCA (as well as GM and Ford) open up their contract negotiations with Unifor, whose contracts with the Detroit Three expire this September. It is expected that vehicle production in Canada on the part of the Detroit Three automakers will fall another 27 percent over the life of the next contract. FCA is clearly throwing down a gauntlet to insist on continued job cuts and more concessions to shore up its profitability.

The future of FCA’s Etobicoke casting plant is already in doubt. At the company’s Brampton assembly facility, which employs 3,400 workers, production capacity is already significantly underutilized as the future of the Dodge Challenger, Dodge Charger and Chrysler 300 sedans remain in limbo.

Autoworkers need to prepare now for the looming battles over jobs and wages, benefits and working conditions. First, workers must organize rank-and-file committees independently of the pro-corporate Unifor and fight for the broadest mobilization of not just autoworkers but all sections of the working class.

This is an international fight. It is not possible to fight globally-organized corporations on a national basis. Rank-and-file committees in Canada must link up with workers in the US, Mexico, Europe and Asia to wage a common fight to defend jobs and living standards.

Finally, this is a fight not just against this or that employer but against the entire capitalist system, which subordinates the needs of the working class—the vast majority of the planet’s population—to the relentless

drive by the corporate and financial oligarchy for more private wealth.

The fight to defend jobs raises the question of who should run the factories. The insistence that workers have the inalienable right to a good-paying and secure job is an implicit challenge to the “right” of Bay Street and wealthy stockholders to own and control giant industries and to close them and destroy entire communities whenever they choose.

The broadest industrial mobilization of the working class against job cuts and concessions must go hand in hand with the organization of a political fight based on a socialist program directed toward the transformation of the auto factories into public utilities under the democratic ownership and control of the working class.



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