

Canadian autoworkers resist Unifor and Detroit Three rush to restart operations

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In an interview with *Automotive News Canada* last Thursday, Unifor President Jerry Dias declared he was “cautiously optimistic” about re-opening Canadian auto assembly and parts plants in early May in accordance with the current plans of the auto companies. “As of now, we haven’t heard this big outcry saying ‘Don’t do it, it’s too early.’ We haven’t heard any of that.”

If the Unifor president hasn’t heard an outcry it is because his ear is turned, as always, to the demands emanating from the corporate boardrooms and not the legitimate concerns of the workers he purports to represent or the recommendations of medical-scientific experts, like the World Health Organization.

Fiat-Chrysler (FCA) announced last week that it wants to re-open its Brampton assembly facility on May 4, with the intention, according to a communication with its suppliers, to re-start its other Canadian assembly operation in Windsor on May 18. Although General Motors and Ford have thus far been reticent to announce a firm start-up date, it appears that they also are eyeing a mid-May reopening. Toyota Canada, with two large non-union plants in southwestern Ontario, has floated a May 4 return to work.

In response to these plans, an “outcry” has, indeed, been registered on the many Canadian autoworker social media groups and feeds. “Refuse to work,” “It’s still unsafe,” “Union leaders, management and government all in bed together,” “They care about their profits, not our lives,” “Don’t go”—these are just a few of the hundreds of responses from autoworkers.

In fact, the current opposition is a direct continuation of job actions that began with a stop-work job action last month at FCA’s Windsor Assembly Plant that quickly spread across the border to Detroit Three facilities in the United States and ultimately forced the

auto companies to temporarily suspend their operations. Now fearing that an early return to work will place them once again in imminent danger of COVID-19 infection, workers have called for a renewal of the campaign of work refusals that forced the suspension of parts and assembly operations beginning in March.

Jerry Dias does not see it that way. Safely ensconced in his work-at-home office, he opined, “The impact that we have had has been significant, but we haven’t had the types of deaths and realities that they’ve had to deal with, especially in Michigan.” In comparison, only “a handful” of cases have occurred in Canada. “We dodged a major bullet here, for sure,” said Dias. “The UAW has had a hell of a lot more confirmed cases of COVID-19 and have had deaths, and we haven’t had the deaths or anywhere near the numbers.”

Shortly after Dias’ interview, Ontario health authorities announced an additional 640 cases of COVID-19 across the province as well as 50 deaths caused by the coronavirus that included individuals under 50 years of age. The stunning numbers represented the most new cases reported over the course of a single day since the pandemic began. On Saturday, Ontario health officials announced another 476 more cases, including 48 additional fatalities.

Workers at FCA Brampton told WSWs reporters that attempts by management to corral skilled trades back into the plant today—Monday, April 27—have met with resistance. The possibility that the company will not be able to drive enough workers back into the plant appears to have given FCA pause. As this article was being completed Sunday afternoon, some workers reported that they had been told that their services would not be needed until later in May. But the company has made no official statement that it is revising its start-up plans.

The *World Socialist Web Site* also receives information from workers at Ford and General Motors. A veteran worker at the Ford Oakville plant stated, “Through numerous discussions with coworkers about the restarting of the plant, most people are concerned that a ‘May Restart’ is too early. Although we have been fortunate enough to not have any coworkers test positive for COVID-19 there’s always a concern that it will come in on the metal or plastic parts.

“For us,” he continued, “it’s a subject that comes with mixed emotions. Our labour contract expires in September of this year and the longer the company is not producing automobiles the harder it will be to get a decent agreement. With Ford announcing a large first quarter loss, we believe they are already starting their media launch to set the stage for ‘We’re broke and we need you to help us get back on track.’ It’s a tactic that we are too familiar with.

“I actually think Ford of Canada has discussed Chapter 11 to restructure and absolve them of their commitment to the Pension Fund. They are supposed to bring the fund to 100 percent by June 30th this year. Ford has been trying to shed that responsibility for years now. This pandemic may give them the opportunity to do it. A few senior employees are retiring right now and taking the commuted value to avoid going through what happened with US Steel and the Stelco pensioners. I’m sure the corporations are communicating daily with government officials to formulate a return to work plan. The corporations want that to be now; the government up here is looking at a 2 to 4 week delay from today. The majority of workers are hoping for a June 1st return.”

A long-time worker at GM’s St. Catharines operation, now retired, said, “I have been telling anyone I can that they have a legal right to refuse what they believe is unsafe work and that if there ever was a time to exercise that right it is now. That said under [Premier] Doug Ford’s [Ontario] Ministry of Labour, inspectors are not responding to refusals by visiting the worksite. They are addressing issues over the phone or by video conference. There needs to be a rash of refusals to force this to change, accompanied by a demand that they come to the worksite.

“The workers also need to remind their representatives that they have this right to refuse unsafe work. The [union] reps don’t want to deal with such

situations. The health and safety reps in St. Catharines are tied at the hip to Management. They would not get into a confrontation if their life depended on it... One other thing. The leadership at the union hall will be eager to see a return to work because the local is taking a big hit in terms of lost union dues.”

To successfully open their Canadian facilities, the automakers must revive their supply chains across North America, which include locations in the United States and Mexico. But workers in both countries have been no more willing than their Canadian brothers and sisters to return to unsafe factories where the risk of infection and potential death is high.

In Mexico, workers in maquiladora sweatshops have struck and protested against unsafe working conditions amid reports of several worker deaths from COVID-19. In keeping with its reactionary anti-Mexican, Canadian nationalist position, Unifor is once again silent about the courageous resistance of the Mexican workers. (See: *Striking against death: Maquiladora workers walk out across northern Mexico* .)

Autoworkers in Canada must oppose the demand that they go back to work under conditions of a raging pandemic. They must establish rank-and-file factory committees, independent of and in opposition to the Unifor corporatist apparatus, to create links of solidarity with their class brothers and sisters across North America and enforce the complete shutdown of the auto and parts industries, with full pay for all workers impacted. These committees must ensure that any return to work is overseen by workers and medical experts, who must be on hand in every plant. Workers should also fight for the Detroit Three, which have made record profits on the basis of wage-gouging and mass layoffs since 2008, to be transformed into publicly-owned utilities under workers’ control.



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