

Fiat Chrysler ends third shift at Windsor, Ontario plant eliminating 1,375 jobs

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Fiat Chrysler Automobiles (FCA) announced last week that the end of the third shift at its Windsor, Ontario auto assembly plant is irrevocably slated for next Monday, July 13. The announcement finalizes earlier plans to eliminate the shift and the 1,375 jobs assigned to it.

About 700 senior workers have accepted a buyout retirement package. Lower seniority workers will simply be laid off and placed on a list for possible rehire as Temporary Part Time workers (TPTs) when such openings occur and at significantly reduced pay and benefits.

When the initial announcement was made in 2019, Unifor officials claimed to have been blindsided by the planned layoffs. The union then did nothing to organize opposition to FCA's aggressive corporate downsizing, which is driven by its determination to boost profitability. Instead, it parroted the company's justification for the move so as to reinforce the sense of inevitability about the process. This no doubt played a role in encouraging many workers to accept buyouts.

Talking like a corporate executive, Unifor Local 444 President Dave Cassidy said the cuts were "strictly a business decision based on the Pacifica." He rejected any comparison to the then impending shutdown of the Oshawa GM plant.

Right-wing Ontario Progressive Conservative Premier Doug Ford then issued a demagogic statement claiming his government "stood behind" Fiat Chrysler workers. He went on to boast that his government was dedicated to boosting corporate profits. "Our government is lowering taxes, lowering electricity rates and slashing red tape. There has never been a better time for auto manufacturers to invest in the province of Ontario," declared Ford.

The New Democratic Party issued similar hollow

statements of solidarity with Windsor autoworkers, while Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau's Minister of Innovation, Science and Economic Development, Navdeep Bains, simply expressed his "disappointment" with FCA's decision.

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 5,900 workers currently employed at the facility, which underwent retooling in 2015 to build the Pacifica. The plant can build up to 1,500 vehicles per day.

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

The announcement of a final layoff date had been expected by autoworkers at the plant for some time. FCA has revised the shift's end date five times since the initial announcement was made last year. In the ensuing months the company delayed issuing a conclusive end date as it calibrated production volumes with the plummeting sales figures of its Grand Caravan and Pacifica models and then, more recently, recalibrated once again to adjust for lost production during the COVID-19 shutdown.

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.

In mid-March, North American automakers

temporarily closed their plants for two months after autoworkers in Canada, the United States and Mexico began to refuse unsafe work and carry out other job actions that included walkouts and wildcat strikes to protest the lack of protections against the spread of the coronavirus in their plants. In fact, it was a day and a half work refusal at the FCA operation in Windsor that began the cascade of job actions across the continent.

Windsor-Essex County, which includes the City of Windsor, remains one of Ontario's COVID-19 hotspots with infection rates skyrocketing amongst migrant farm worker populations.

Work refusals have once again gathered steam in plants located across the river in Detroit, where virus infections are spiking. In recent days, autoworkers at FCA Jefferson North and FCA Sterling Heights have staged work stoppages over recurring infections. In both plants workers formed their own rank-and-file safety factory committees in opposition to the joint United Auto Workers (UAW) and FCA drive to force workers to continue production regardless of the deadly virus threat (see: Fiat Chrysler threatens to fire workers who stop production over COVID-19 concerns).

There was one other contributing factor to the previous delays in finalizing the third shift closure date in Windsor—the upcoming contract negotiations at the Canadian operations of the Detroit Three automakers.

It is no coincidence that the Windsor layoffs will take effect only two months before contracts expire at FCA, Ford, and General Motors facilities in Canada for about 16,000 autoworkers. 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. The latest layoffs will be used as a threat by FCA to bully and intimidate autoworkers into accepting sweeping concessions, including wage and job cuts.

The future of 160 jobs at FCA's Etobicoke casting plant is already in doubt. At the company's Brampton assembly operation, which employs 3,400 workers, production capacity is currently significantly underutilized, as the future of the Dodge Challenger, Dodge Charger and Chrysler 300 sedans remain in limbo.

This strategy is not limited to FCA. Just weeks before the Canada Detroit Three contract negotiations are set to begin, analysts are reporting that Ford may be

planning to phase out its Oakville assembly plant by 2023 due to the cancellation of its Edge cross-over program. Ford has axed more than 1,000 jobs in Oakville over the past year. For its part, General Motors laid down the gauntlet last year with the shuttering of its keystone assembly plant in Oshawa, Ontario that saw 2,300 assembly jobs slashed and thousands more auto parts jobs destroyed.

Unifor President Jerry Dias has already signalled that he will once again do everything in his power to suppress worker job action and to prove to the Detroit Three automakers that Unifor can be relied on to ensure that their Canadian plants are among their most profitable anywhere in the world.

In a May interview with *Automotive News Canada* previewing the contract negotiations, Dias went out of his way to proclaim his opposition to a strike. If “after months and months and months of reduced volume based on the pandemic” things are “starting to get back to a resemblance of where they were pre-crisis, no one is going to want a disruption,” said Dias. “And I mean nobody; both the workers and the automakers.”

With workers having been driven back into the plants in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an urgent need for workers to build rank-and-file safety committees independent of and in opposition to the union. These committees must ensure that health and safety precautions are enforced and production is immediately shut down when infections occur. In opposition to the automakers' demands for layoffs to boost investor payouts and corporate profitability, they should also take up the fight to defend all jobs.

These committees must be the springboard to seize the conduct of the fight for a new contract out of the hands of the Unifor bureaucrats, forge unity with autoworkers in the US and Mexico, and organize a counteroffensive against all concessions, two-tier wages, and job cuts.



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