

Company Town: a damning look at the role of Unifor in the GM Oshawa plant closure

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Documentary film written and directed by Peter D. Findlay

Company Town is a feature-length documentary film recently released on CBC's new streaming service, Gem. It deals with the ending of production at General Motors' storied Oshawa, Ontario assembly plant, in December 2019.

Coming after more than a century of automobile production in Oshawa, which saw over 23,000 workers employed at the peak of operation in the 1980s, the shutdown represented the final stage in a long history of job cuts and union-imposed concessions. Around 2,000 jobs were lost directly when production was halted, and an additional 2,500 at parts suppliers and other local businesses. A small stamping operation employing around 300 workers began operating after December 2019.

The film follows events from the time of the closure announcement in November 2018 until the final day of production a year later.

It must be said at the outset that *Company Town* entirely ignores that the closure of the Oshawa plant was part of an international offensive against autoworkers by GM aimed at restructuring its operations to boost global competitiveness and investor profit. Along with the job losses in Canada, the automaker shuttered four plants in the United States and two more outside of North America.

By failing to acknowledge this fact, filmmaker Peter Findlay, unwittingly or otherwise, adapts to the Unifor trade union's Canadian nationalist and corporatist perspective, which was exemplified in its response to the plant closure announcement. Unifor's "Save Oshawa GM" campaign was predicated on acceptance of GM's need to boost its profitability, and pitted Canadian workers against their US and Mexican class brothers and sisters. It was aimed at convincing GM that the Oshawa plant could still serve its profit needs. Moreover, as part of its nationalist flag-waving, Unifor openly incited anti-Mexican chauvinism, and this at the very point where a rebellion had erupted among workers employed by the automakers and their suppliers in Mexico's maquiladora industrial belt.

Company Town does have merits, including a sympathetic portrayal of the plight of the autoworkers and their families. But Findlay's uncritical adaptation to the toxic nationalism of Unifor and its president, Jerry Dias, seriously impairs his ability to account for what happened. Above all, it prevents him from offering an explanation of the role played by Unifor in paving the way for the shutdown.

Findlay generally approaches his material with care and sensitivity. But due to the film's political limitations there is more dramatic pathos than journalistic acumen in his coverage of those affected, including his interactions with some of the more than 2,000 unionized workers at feeder operations, and countless others throughout the local area, who lost their livelihoods in a region already impacted by years of economic decline.

General Motors comes in for sharp criticism for its callous treatment of its workforce, many of whom, having given most of their lives to the company, got their termination notices just days before Christmas. Glimpsing into the lives of these workers, we come to share their sense of outrage—not only against the company, but more significantly against Unifor and its president, Dias, in particular.

Despite the director's stated aim to not take sides in what he claims was a very complicated set of circumstances, various workers vocally target Dias for his cowardly and treacherous role in the shutdown. But little to no context is provided. The Unifor president is not challenged when he brags about wildcat strikes workers mounted to save their jobs—militant action that he and his union did everything to strangle for fear that it would spread.

Early in the film, Kevin Craggs, who is employed by a supplier to GM, is asked, "Are you angry with GM?" He responds, "Not surprised that GM is greedy, but I was angry about how I was treated by the union. ... I have zero confidence in Jerry Dias." Another worker declares, "What's the surprise is how we were treated by our union. I'm a unionist through and through. But there was a hell of a lot more that they could have done for us."

This is fine as far as it goes, but Findlay's refusal to approach the broader issues of GM's global restructuring and Unifor's bitter hostility to an internationally unified struggle by autoworkers in defence of their jobs leaves him at a loss as to what workers should do. The one ray of hope promoted in the film is an initiative called "Green Jobs Oshawa," which advocates the federal Liberal government take over the plant and repurpose it to build electric vehicles. Its most vocal advocate is Rebecca Keetch, a third-generation autoworker who is facing an otherwise uncertain future. Her efforts feature prominently in the story and one gets the sense that the director has certain sympathies with the project, though he shows it being rudely dismissed as a pipe dream by Jerry Dias.

On this subject, we also hear from Sam Gindin. As the long-time research director of the Canadian Autoworkers (CAW), which

became Unifor in 2013, Gindin played a key role in providing the ideological justification for the CAW's 1985 nationalist split from the UAW. Today he is among the principal leaders of the Socialist Project. In promoting Green Jobs Oshawa, Gindin continues to advance a corporatist/nationalist agenda that isolates workers in Oshawa from any broader or anti-capitalist struggle.

The dead end of this perspective can be seen in the recently concluded auto contracts at Ford and Fiat Chrysler. They were predicated on the provision of hundreds of millions of dollars in federal and provincial government subsidies to the automakers in exchange for their commitment to build electric vehicles in Oakville and Windsor. To ensure that the two automakers had a viable "business case" for electric vehicle production, Unifor acted as their errand boys, pressing the governments to provide them huge state subsidies and imposing new attacks on autoworkers' jobs and working conditions.

A well of anger and distrust of the union emerges in the course of the film that is downplayed by giving Dias more than equal time to plead his case. Bouncing between braggadocio and insincere mea culpas, Dias claims that the union did everything it possibly could. By way of illustration, he boasts that Unifor even bought advertising during the Super Bowl to promote a boycott of GM vehicles made in Mexico.

Notwithstanding Findlay's determination to give the Unifor president more than his fair share of opportunities to answer his critics in the film, one gets the sense that the rounds of loud and public threats by Dias against GM ring as hollow and dishonest bluster in the eyes of much of the union membership.

The political message that is drummed repeatedly by the union leadership is their demand for national protections for Canadian jobs. Insisting that GM produce cars in the country in which they are sold, Unifor portrays Mexican workers as the enemy, even resorting to racist clichés and stereotypes. This xenophobic poison underpins Unifor's boycott campaign. Significantly, the film does not show any workers expressing support for these nationalist views.

The film also documents the fortuitous involvement of rock legend Sting, who reached out to Unifor to lend his support for the Oshawa workers while on tour in Toronto for *The Last Ship*, his play about militant trade union struggles in England in the 1980s. A long-time supporter of working class struggles, Sting gave a concert for union members and allowed Findlay the use of two of his songs in the film virtually free of charge.

Without any real critique of the ruinous strategy of Unifor in Oshawa or elsewhere, we are left with little more than an airing of grievances and disappointments against Dias and his cohorts. Giving equal attention to Dias's hand-wringing show of concern and the impact on his own household, the director strains for a sort of even-handed compassion that flies in the face of the record of betrayal of Dias and his leadership. Indeed, it would have been more fitting to point out that Dias still has his six-figure union salary and lavish expense account, not to mention his close ties to the Trudeau Liberal government and corporate Canada.

Peter Findlay is no political novice. He has written or produced a good deal of material around social issues with a particular focus on figures of the pseudo-left, like Maude Barlow, the former head

of the Council of Canadians, and Avi Lewis, co-author of the Leap Manifesto. He seems genuinely sympathetic to the losses suffered by workers and his determination to bring this story to public attention is to be commended, but the film cannot help but reflect the limitations of his own reformist politics and Canadian nationalism.

Presenting the Oshawa shutdown with no mention of the record of concessions and betrayals of Dias, Unifor and the entire trade union leadership, the film leaves the viewer with the impression that this is just a sad story with a predictably grim outcome. Lacking any conception of the working class as an independent political force, workers are presented as heroic but impotent victims of both global capitalism and their well-meaning but flawed leaders.

Having ventured into this important struggle with even the best of intentions, absent a grasp of the historic problems of leadership facing workers in the current period, Findlay and his collaborators have little to offer beyond their sympathies and best wishes.

It should be noted that since the release of *Company Town*, Unifor has struck a deal with GM for a new production line in Oshawa beginning in 2022 that allows the company to dispense with seniority and wage protections for workers, almost all of whom will start as new hires at rock bottom rates. Dias has sought to seize on this development as a justification of his grovelling appeals to the auto bosses and promotion of Canadian nationalism.

In reality, Unifor's role amounts to a continuation in a new form of the gutting of workers' wages and working conditions. Having connived with GM to force the vast majority of legacy workers to retire or accept buyouts when production was idled, Unifor has now consented to the hiring of low-wage second tier workers, an expansion of temporary part-time employees with virtually no rights, and the adoption of the hated alternative work schedule (AWS). While it is difficult to prove that Unifor and GM agreed prior to the 2019 shutdown that the plant would reopen depending on the company's business needs, the fact remains that Unifor's policy has decimated thousands of decent-paying, formerly secure jobs, replaced them with precarious low-wage work, and helped GM achieve hundreds of millions in cost savings.

Findlay has indicated that going forward he will take up the crisis in long-term care in Ontario that has been so tragically exposed in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. That would be an important undertaking. However, it would benefit from a more critical and historically-informed approach than that displayed in *Company Town*.



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