

UAW silent as Stellantis moves to slash nearly half of workforce at its Belvidere, Illinois Assembly Plant

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16 May 2021

Global automaker Stellantis announced Friday that it will cut production from two shifts down to one at its Belvidere Jeep Assembly Plant in Belvidere, Illinois, by July 26. The move will result in the permanent layoff of 1,641 workers at the plant, formerly under Fiat Chrysler, slashing the plant's current workforce nearly in half.

Stellantis cited the ongoing semiconductor chip shortage in the auto industry as the basis for its decision to sacrifice the livelihoods of workers and their families. While production at auto plants across the US and around the world has been impacted by the chip shortage, it is also well known that Stellantis is considering the closure of the Belvidere plant.

In a statement reported in the *Detroit News*, Stellantis spokesperson Jodi Tinson said the job cuts are aimed to "balance sales with production," meaning that as auto sales have dropped, likely due in large part to the fall in living standards during the pandemic, the corporation is seeking to make workers suffer the consequences. According to *Bloomberg*, "While demand for vehicles has been outstripping supply as the U.S. emerges from pandemic lockdowns and people opt for private transportation, the Cherokee hasn't been a major beneficiary. Sales tumbled 29% last year to 191,397, while deliveries at the Jeep brand fell 14% amid pandemic shutdowns."

The *News* added that according to Tinson, "The Company will make every effort to place laid off hourly employees in open full-time positions as they become available based on seniority," which remains to be seen as auto industry analysts predict the impact of the chip shortage in the auto industry will continue to impact production into 2022.

The semiconductor chips that are used in vehicles' automated driver systems, infotainment systems and heated seats are also used in consumer electronics. The computer chip makers, facing a surge in demand, were unable to maintain production to meet demand after the COVID-19 pandemic began to sweep across the globe. Due to the chip shortage Ford has extended plant shutdowns by an additional two weeks at its Chicago Assembly Plant, Flat Rock Assembly Plant in Michigan, and Kansas City Assembly Plant in Claycomo, Missouri, through at

least May 30.

General Motors extended its shutdown of the CAMI Ontario SUV assembly plant through July 4 as well as extending the shutdown of the Fairfax Assembly Plant in Kansas through July 8. The fate of both plants hangs in the balance, as both have been shut down since February 8 and GM is eyeing the possibility of closing them entirely. GM has also closed its assembly plants in San Luis Potosi and Ramos, Mexico, through the end of May.

Automakers Toyota and Honda also reported production disruptions at their plants in North America beginning in March.

Stellantis has shut down production at its Windsor, Ontario, minivan plant in Canada through May 23. Stellantis has idled the Belvidere Assembly Plant off and on since February citing the chip shortage. In addition to the announcement of the layoffs, production will be halted through the end of May at the Belvidere plant, along with Stellantis Warren Truck Assembly Plant in Michigan.

Stellantis has also extended furloughs of workers at its Kokomo and Tipton, Indiana, transmission plant complex as a result of the shortage of chips as well as falling auto sales. According to the *Kokomo Tribune*, 1,000 workers that build nine-speed transmissions at the complex who have been laid off since April will be laid off through the first week of June. Another shift of workers who build eight-speed transmissions at the Kokomo plant are furloughed through June 14.

The drastic job cuts at Belvidere Assembly have heightened concerns that Stellantis is setting its sights on closing the plant for good as part of consolidation following the merger between French-owned PSA group and Italian-American automaker Fiat Chrysler earlier this year. In February, one month after the merger, the newly formed Stellantis moved to lay off 150 workers from the plant indefinitely.

In 2020, 3,900 workers were laid off permanently at the Belvidere plant shortly after the United Auto Workers union pushed through a series of concessions contracts following the union's isolation and betrayal of the strike of 48,000 GM workers. The UAW went on to force the same givebacks on

workers at Ford and Fiat Chrysler. In the recent period Fiat Chrysler/Stellantis has been making efforts to consolidate its US operations in Michigan in order to squeeze out as much profit as possible from fewer and fewer workers.

Considerable resources had been invested in the remodeling and expansion of the Mack Avenue complex in Detroit prior to the Belvidere layoffs. Significantly, Stellantis has also imposed a grueling 12 hour per day, 7 day per week schedule on skilled trades workers at the Sterling Heights Assembly Plant north of Detroit. This schedule, which faced immense opposition from workers, was implemented with the approval of the UAW using revised language relating to the Alternative Work Schedule slipped into the 2019 national auto contract.

The job cuts at Belvidere Assembly Plant will have a devastating impact on the working class in the area. The cuts once again demonstrate the complete bankruptcy of the UAW's claims that the 2019 contract as well as its support for the Fiat Chrysler-PSA merger would ensure job security.

For its part, UAW Local 1268 at Belvidere has said almost nothing about the layoffs despite their devastating scope. Meanwhile, UAW Local 685 President Matt Jarvis said of the layoffs in Kokomo, "I think this is going to be our normal through the end of the year," showing the complacent attitude of the UAW toward the destruction of the livelihoods of workers and their families.

According to one Belvidere autoworker, who spoke anonymously to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter*, many workers had expected another mass layoff due to the critical parts shortage. "They take 50 to 100 chips per vehicle, and it's a process to make those."

Workers at the plant on layoff reported to local news outlets that they had also had problems getting unemployment pay. Illinois Republican Representative Joe Sosnowski told local station WREX News at the end of April that his office had "ten or twenty phone calls a day" from Belvidere Assembly workers who were struggling to get their unemployment claims fulfilled through an unresponsive system.

The Belvidere worker, citing her own experiences, said, "I let a paycheck go because I was tired of dealing with them. They don't call you back."

Denouncing the UAW's role in letting workers go without needed benefits, she continued, "74 percent sub pay [supplemental unemployment benefits]—the paycheck that I let go I was supposed to get six hundred dollars for unemployment. I was screwed over. We pay our union dues, and they [the union] say can't help with that."

The job cuts will also pose a significant safety risk to workers who are already working on skeleton crews. The worker detailed the daily reality workers face of unsafe conditions. In addition to working in close contact indoors during a deadly pandemic, she noted that deaths have gone unreported at the plant.

"[We have] no air conditioning, it stinks. It's a tin can,

standing out in the sun with aluminum all around and having the sun beat down on it. We've had several people die. They won't [declare someone dead until they're out of the plant]. An electrician, he was sitting down on the chair, stayed there sitting there so long, and he was dead. This was about a year and a half ago."

Workers who are looking for a way to fight the jobs bloodbath in the auto industry and oppose deadly working conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic must fight to break free from the corporatist unions and build their own rank-and-file committees by and for the workers themselves to draw up their own demands. In particular, workers must reject the attempts of the UAW to pose the defense of jobs in nationalist terms as a battle against brother workers in Mexico or China.

Workers around the globe are exploited for the benefit of the same corporations. Indeed the impact from the chip shortage is not limited to North America, but has also affected workers in Europe and Asia.

The job cuts stem from the fact that under capitalism production is based on private profit, not human need. This raises the necessity of workers forging international bonds of unity in a common struggle against the transnational automakers to demand jobs and decent conditions for all.

Stellantis Belvidere Assembly workers must oppose the claim that there is no alternative to job cuts. To organize a fightback workers must mobilize independently of the pro-company UAW and forge links with Volvo truck workers in Virginia, who voted down the UAW's sellout contract by 91 percent, graduate students in New York City, Warrior Met coal miners in Alabama, and their brothers and sisters worldwide who are part of an emerging wave of working class struggle against the capitalist system. We encourage Belvidere Assembly workers who want to join this struggle to build the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to go to wsws.org/auto today.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact