

Stellantis moves to cut half of hourly workforce at Belvidere, Illinois, Jeep plant beginning June 1

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28 May 2021

Stellantis is moving forward rapidly with the planned layoff of nearly half of the hourly workforce at its Belvidere Assembly Plant in Belvidere, Illinois, south of the Wisconsin border. Local news station WIFR reported last week that workers at the plant received a message stating that only first shift would report to work when production is expected to resume June 1. The plant has been idled off and on since February of this year due to the ongoing semiconductor chip shortage, which has disrupted production throughout the global auto industry.

The layoff of the plant's entire second shift, to be completed by July 26, was announced less than one week before the company announced the latest shift reduction. The planned layoff is to be "indefinite," that is to say, most likely permanent.

This attack on the workers at Stellantis Belvidere Assembly Plant will have a devastating impact on working-class families in the area. The plant is one of the main employers in the Rockford, Illinois, region, which has undergone a decades-long process of deindustrialization. WIFR cited Illinois Republican Senator Dave Syverson's concern that the economic impact of the layoff will "reach every corner" of the Illinois-Wisconsin border area.

Workers at the Belvidere plant have complained that many of them have faced difficulty in collecting unemployment benefits during the production cuts, a problem that has not been resolved. Furthermore, already facing increased risk of infection due to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) dropping its mask and social distancing guidelines during the deadly coronavirus pandemic, workers will face even more dangers to their health and safety at work as a result of the reduction in the workforce. Speedup and sheer lack of support for maintenance and operations in the plant could lead to more fatigue, injuries and even deaths.

According to *Automotive News*, Stellantis took close to 38,000 vehicles out of production in North America during

the third week of May, the majority of which, 36,000, were Jeep SUVs scheduled to be built at the Belvidere plant. Another 1,100 Chrysler Voyager minivans and 900 Chrysler Pacifica minivans were taken out of production at its Windsor, Ontario, plant in Canada, which has been idled since March 29 and will remain shut down through the end of this week, according to the latest company reports. The Windsor plant is expected to restart production on a partial basis beginning May 31.

Ford had also announced that eight of its North American plants would remain idled through various times in June, with plans to reopen on reduced schedules for limited production in order to continue to squeeze out profits during the ongoing chip shortage. Ford cut 93,000 vehicles from North American production in the third week of May.

Like their fellow workers at other auto plants around the world, Ford workers in the US have also been forced to bear the brunt of the production crisis. Ford workers face ongoing layoffs and job cuts with no end in sight. Workers have been finding it difficult to secure unemployment payments, with many states having begun to eliminate the federal \$300 weekly supplemental unemployment payments.

In total, nearly 3 million vehicles have been taken out of production worldwide in 2021 as a result of the parts shortage, and automakers and suppliers now widely believe that the chip shortage will continue to impact production for an extended period. A May 22 report by industry news site *caranddriver.com* remarked that an April survey of global auto industry experts found that "almost three-quarters of respondents, 72 percent, said they expect the chip shortage crisis to impact the industry for at least six months."

Carmakers have now implemented processes in an attempt to work around the chip shortage so that plants can continue to run and profits can continue to flow.

Stellantis has cut out the intelligent rear-view mirror from Dodge Ram 1500 pickup trucks, and Nissan has opted out of adding navigational systems to some vehicles. Ford has

reportedly continued to build its best-selling F-150 trucks without the chips, with the idea that the chips will be added when they become available.

According to the Motley Fool, “Stellantis said that the chip shortage cost it about 11% of its planned production in the first quarter, or roughly 190,000 vehicles.” Yet, the corporation, which formed as the result of a merger between Italian-American automaker Fiat Chrysler and French automaker PSA, expects to be on track to meet post-merger profitability targets. Stellantis has posted 14 percent net pro forma revenue gains in the first quarter of 2021 compared to what the merged companies were projected to have made separately in the first quarter of 2020. Its pro forma net revenue is reported to be \$37 billion, with combined global shipments up 12 percent overall in spite of a quarter-end drop in inventory of nearly 33 percent.

The immense amount of wealth generated by Stellantis even in the midst of a supply chain crisis against the backdrop of the global pandemic is the result of relentless attacks on the working class that the corporation has carried out worldwide with the help of nationally based trade unions. At Belvidere Assembly 3,900 workers were permanently laid off in 2020 soon after the United Auto Workers (UAW) pushed through a sellout agreement following the union’s isolation and betrayal of the strike by 48,000 General Motors workers. The UAW went on to force the same pattern of concessions it accepted at GM on workers at Ford and what was then Fiat Chrysler.

The layoffs at its Belvidere plant take place under conditions where Stellantis has been making efforts to consolidate its US production in Michigan in order to squeeze out as much profit as possible from fewer and fewer workers. In April Stellantis implemented a grueling 12-hour per day, 7-day per week work schedule for skilled trades workers at its Sterling Heights Assembly Plant near Detroit. Although met with fierce opposition from rank-and-file autoworkers, the UAW sanctioned the draconian schedule through the terms of the alternative work schedule it negotiated in the 2019 sellout agreements.

The UAW has done virtually nothing to oppose the cuts at Belvidere Assembly, which point to the possibility if not the likelihood that the plant could be shut down entirely. A lawsuit brought by rival automaker GM in 2020 labeled the UAW an “FCA-controlled enterprise.” In reality, the union has been completely exposed as a pro-corporate, criminal organization deep in the pockets of all major US auto corporations. The findings of the criminal probe of the UAW reveal an organization which takes workers’ dues money and forces through sellout contracts, while from the top down to the local level, officials receive a share of corporate profits extracted from the sweat of workers in addition to

bribes and kickbacks from the corporations themselves.

Workers at the Belvidere Assembly Plant have the right to good-paying and secure jobs. To fight for them, they must organize independently of the UAW in a rank-and-file committee to demand an end to the job cuts, reinstatement of all laid-off workers, protection of the plant from closure, an end to the tier system and an automatic wage increase and full benefits for all workers.

Workers worldwide are coming ever more into opposition not just with the corporations, but the trade unions that keep them tied to the profit system. Autoworkers in the US have to reject the corporatist and nationalist program of the UAW and mobilize independently if they do not want their struggles to continue to be isolated and defeated. There is no nationalist solution to the job cuts, which are part of a global assault on autoworkers. The transnational auto companies, with the help of the unions, stoke nationalism in order to divide workers, pitting workers in different countries against each other in order to prevent united resistance. The problem is not “foreign competition” but the capitalist system itself and private ownership of industry for profit. The defense of jobs can only be successful as part of a global strategy, seeking to unite workers in every country based on a socialist program.

Autoworkers worldwide must demand the immense wealth generated through their labor be expropriated from the giant banks and corporations and put toward resources to end the threat of unemployment and get the COVID-19 pandemic under control. Through the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, autoworkers under attack by the capitalist class around the world will have the ability to link up with such struggles as those of Volvo Truck workers in Virginia, Hyundai and Renault-Nissan workers in India, and other sections of workers to mobilize the international working class as a unified force. If you are an autoworker, contact the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* today to learn how to start a committee at your plant.



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