

Stellantis Belvidere Assembly workers face extended downtime while UAW signs off on second shift layoff

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Stellantis' Belvidere Assembly Plant will remain on extended shutdown through at least June 28, the company said in an announcement last week. First shift workers at the plant, who build the Jeep Cherokee crossover SUV, are expected to return on July 6, following the previously planned idle week of June 28.

The plant has been shut down since June 7 and was originally expected to last two weeks. This is the second shutdown to hit the plant this year; Belvidere had earlier been on shutdown beginning March 29. After pushing the reopening date back at least twice, the plant finally reopened June 1 before closing again a week later.

During the shutdowns, many workers have reported major difficulties in being able to collect much-needed state unemployment benefits on time in order to pay for bills, housing and food.

The closures are due to the continuing global semiconductor chip shortage, which is expected to have an effect on global supply chains into 2022. However, it is being worsened by new outbreaks of the COVID-19 pandemic in Taiwan, where a majority of the chips are produced. They are critical components in communications, computers and weapons manufacture, and in the auto industry they are used in heated seats, touchscreens, infotainment and driverless technology systems.

However, workers at Belvidere have faced a series of job cuts in recent years which place a question mark over the plant's future. In May, the company announced it would "indefinitely" lay off the entire second shift of 1,641 hourly workers, half of the plant's workforce, by July 26. However, management sped up these plans when it earlier announced plans to resume production on June 1 with the first shift only.

United Auto Workers Local 1268, which has done

nothing to fight years of job cuts, posted a schedule of in-person meetings on its public Facebook page, held yesterday at the Tebala Event Center in Rockford, Illinois, for all workers who received layoff notices. Last week, Stellantis sent a form to workers who are being laid off to volunteer to transfer to its Warren Truck Assembly Plant in Warren, Michigan, nearly 400 miles away.

Workers who decide to transfer their jobs and who are granted the transfer must do so under the condition that they cannot reverse their decision and must report to work by either July 19 or July 26 at management's discretion. Workers must decide by June 17 and were given just one week to make their decision.

When the indefinite layoff of the second shift was announced May 14, the UAW remained virtually silent until May 28, when it posted benefit information for those who would be laid off. Local officials made no efforts to voice opposition to the job cuts. On June 3, after two articles had been published by the *World Socialist Web Site* exposing the union's acceptance of the layoffs, Local 1268 President Kevin Logan posted a condescending letter to the Facebook page that outlined the local's excuses for keeping silent in an effort to tamp down opposition from the rank and file.

"I received a call from the HR Manager ... on May 14," the letter reads. "... He said the Company was going to send a call-post out by 9:30 a.m., with notification to employees of the shift reduction. It [sic] was also told that the WARN [layoff] letters were going out in the mail that same morning. ... The WARN letters were already typed up prior to anyone in the UAW Local 1268 Leadership getting a chance to discuss it with management, so there could be more accurate information on what needed to be done to determine approximately what seniority would hold the plant..."

The letter goes on to state that the Shop Committee was not able to do any work since the week following Easter because of the temporary layoff and because no one from management was able to meet with them to “discuss the process with the Company to determine a plan moving forward.”

The letter concludes by condescendingly telling workers that “The best way to protect the future of this plant, and the potential return of the 2nd and 3rd shifts, is to continue to build the best vehicle possible.”

In a year in which the two most recent former presidents of the UAW have been sentenced to prison for embezzling dues money and accepting company bribes, the letter is a further exposure of the pro-company allegiance of the UAW. The union is not organizing Belvidere Assembly to halt the layoffs. Instead, adopting the language and tone of management, it is instructing them to work harder or else risk losing their jobs.

Indeed, there is no reason to believe that “continuing to build the best vehicle possible” will do anything to secure the future of the Belvidere Assembly Plant. A recent *Detroit News* article cited industry group LMC Automotive’s forecast for Belvidere Assembly, which projects that the plant will run under 40 percent of its productive capacity this year due to the layoffs, “below the industry standard to ensure profitability.” LMC reports that the plant was producing at 90 percent capacity in 2018 but dropped to 70 percent in 2019 after then-Fiat Chrysler cut the third shift after the ratification of the four-year national contract.

Moreover, the union is deliberately isolating workers at Stellantis and other major automakers from the Volvo Trucks workers in strike in Dublin, Virginia. The UAW was compelled to call the strike only after workers twice defied threats from the local and International bureaucrats and voted down a concessions-laden contract, which was personally backed by Secretary-Treasurer Ray Curry. To date, the union has not even acknowledged the strike on its website or any of its social media pages, and many autoworkers are not even aware a strike is taking place.

Workers must be on guard against the “Made in America” nationalism, which will inevitably be employed by the UAW as a smokescreen, blaming the cuts in the plant on competition from “foreign” workers. This will only pit workers around the world, all of whom have the same interests and confront the same multinational corporations, against each other in a race to accept lower wages in order to preserve “their own” national industry.

Such “America First” nationalism has long been the

stock-in-trade of the UAW, which has the added function of obscuring its own role in carrying through plant closures. In 1979, Chrysler CEO Lee Iacocca brought the UAW onto the company’s board of directors in order to collaborate with the union in closing down dozens of facilities and laying off tens of thousands of workers. Meanwhile, the union has been handsomely rewarded through its control of billions of dollars in corporate stock, in addition to direct bribes.

Frustration and anger are taking hold among workers at Belvidere. One veteran worker said, “They are having meetings soon for anybody that wants to go to Warren Truck for either \$30,000 to permanently stay or \$6,000 with the option of coming back to Belvidere. No word yet if there will be any buyouts. We get no info on the future of the plant. One question I have is that 10 years ago there were [buyout] packages worth \$100,000. Now I’m only worth \$60,000? Where was my union for that?”

The way forward for Stellantis Belvidere Assembly workers has been demonstrated by the Volvo truck workers, who have formed a rank-and-file committee to oppose the UAW-backed sellout contract and challenge the union’s isolation of their strike. Such committees must be built at plants throughout the country.

Rank-and-file committees are also being built around the world as part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), linking workers together on an international scale on the basis of a common platform of strategy as a critical step to unleashing the full power and potential of the working class in the fight for higher living standards and for a science-based strategy to end the pandemic.

If you are a Stellantis Belvidere worker, contact the WSWS today to learn how you can start a rank-and-file committee at your plant.



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