

Opponent of COVID-19 vaccine mandate arrested for bombing at Stellantis Windsor Assembly Plant

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Windsor, Ontario police arrested 33-year-old James Harris last week in connection with the November 4 bombing at the city's Stellantis auto assembly plant. Harris has been charged with planting and exploding a crude home-made explosive device inside an isolated storage area at the plant.

Workers on the November 4 afternoon shift immediately evacuated the premises. No one was injured in the explosion. Stellantis ordered production to re-start the following morning.

Harris was a custodian at the Windsor facility for the past five years. He was an employee of a third-party contractor to Stellantis and a member of Unifor Local 195. The local organizes auto parts workers and various other third-party employees in the parts and assembly industries in the Windsor area. Harris was suspended from his job several days after the explosion. The official charges against him include explosion with disregard for human life and intending to cause an explosion likely to cause harm or death or serious damage to property.

Whether or not Harris carried out the bombing—and there is considerable evidence to suggest he did—this disoriented and politically reactionary act should be unequivocally condemned by all autoworkers. Such acts of individual violence do not contribute, and indeed are detrimental, to developing the political struggle autoworkers must wage to defend their jobs against Stellantis' global restructuring plans, and protect their very lives against the threat of COVID-19 infection produced by the automakers' determination to keep production running during the pandemic.

The incident sheds light on the criminal role played by far-right anti-vaccination groups. It also reveals the complicity of corporations like Stellantis and trade unions like Unifor in fostering the political climate that gives rise to such acts of despair.

Everything points to the fact that the bombing was a direct response to Stellantis' October 14 decision to impose a vaccine mandate for all employees, contractors and visitors to its facilities effective December 17, 2021. Harris was among a few dozen workers and supporters who protested this announcement outside the local Unifor headquarters on Oct. 18. According to Harris' mother, Pauline Maisonneuve, her unvaccinated son was among the loudest protesters against the mandate and denounced it on social media. She has insisted, however, that she cannot believe her son would have bombed the plant.

One day after announcing the vaccine mandate, Stellantis said that it will eliminate an entire shift at its Windsor Assembly Plant as of spring 2022, costing 1,800 jobs. Unifor has refused to organize any opposition to this massive onslaught by management. Instead, Unifor president Jerry Dias has justified the company action as a “business decision,” motivated by the microchip shortage and the impact of COVID-19. The plant has only operated at full capacity for 15 weeks during 2021.

In fact, Stellantis' move is part of a global restructuring of its operations across North America and Europe aimed at slashing labour costs and thereby guaranteeing bumper payouts to rich shareholders. The restructuring plan was a key element in the PSA Group's decision to merge with the smaller Fiat-Chrysler last January and create Stellantis.

Management's claims to be concerned with “protecting our employees' health” are a fraud. Throughout, Stellantis' pandemic policies, like its global-cost cutting strategy, have had as their goal maximizing profits—a drive in which workers' lives and livelihoods are viewed as dispensable.

The company has been more than willing to see workers lives placed at risk from the deadly virus, as attested by its opposition to basic safety measures and the outbreaks and multiple deaths at many of its US facilities, including Sterling Heights Stamping and Warren Truck. If it has embraced vaccines, it is because it sees them as a way to minimize disruptions to its operations, while the federal and provincial governments, with the like aim of promoting corporate profit-making, eliminate all remaining COVID-19 protections and proclaim that working people must “learn to live with the virus”—i.e., accept continuing waves of infections and deaths for the foreseeable future.

In contrast to Stellantis' cynical exploitation of the vaccine to pose as a protector of workers' health and well-being, the *World Socialist Web Site* has insisted that mass vaccination is a key public health tool to combat COVID-19. But mass vaccination can only prove successful in preventing COVID-19 from becoming endemic if it is combined with a comprehensive program of public health measures, including testing, the isolation of infected people, contact tracing, and the temporary shutdown of nonessential production like the auto industry, with full pay for workers impacted, until all community transmission is suppressed.

The central question raised by recent events at the Windsor plant

is this: why has there been no organized worker resistance to management's savage attacks throughout the pandemic? Why was the only recent protest over Stellantis' actions one organized by a handful of disoriented workers and some far-right, anti-vaxxer provocateurs?

The answer is that the Unifor bureaucracy has systematically suppressed any struggle by autoworkers, whether against the COVID-19 pandemic and the dangerous working conditions produced by the corporate elite's "profits before life" policy, or Stellantis' cost-cutting plans, which, including the latest announcement, have cost close to 3,500 jobs since the beginning of 2020.

Unifor has, however, given succour to far-right anti-vaxxer groups. The union filed a grievance against the company's vaccine mandate, which is opposed by only a tiny fraction of the workforce. And not on the grounds that the threat of immediate termination is excessive, but of "personal rights."

In an October 26 letter, Unifor Local 44 thunders that that "no worker" should lose their job if they "choose not to get vaccinated." Yet it has not lifted a finger to defend the thousands of workers and their relatives whose livelihoods have been involuntarily destroyed due to Stellantis' global restructuring drive. In presenting the COVID-19 vaccine as a "personal choice," Unifor is lining up with the far-right enemies of the working class—with the likes of Maxime Bernier and his People's Party and Trump's libertarian and fascistic supporters in the US, who fraudulently portray vaccine mandates and masks as an attack on "freedoms" and "personal rights." In fact, nobody who has ready access to the COVID-19 vaccine has the "right" to refuse it so they can go around infecting others with a potentially deadly virus.

Throughout the pandemic, Stellantis (formerly Fiat-Chrysler) has focused on compelling its workforce to maintain production under dangerous working conditions so as to protect shareholder payouts and corporate profits. Recognizing that the company had no interest in protecting their health and lives as the pandemic spread, workers at the Windsor Assembly Plant spontaneously downed tools in mid-March 2020, sparking similar rebellions by workers at Detroit Three auto plants across the United States. The protests were also directed against Unifor, and the UAW south of the border, as both unions had pledged to work with management to keep the plants running without interruption. The rank-and-file actions played a major role in forcing governments in North America and Europe to impose temporary lockdowns.

Faced with this working-class upsurge, the automakers made a tactical retreat and shuttered their facilities for several weeks. But by May 2020, with the trade unions in the lead, management reopened all their facilities and forced workers back on the job with totally inadequate protections.

Canadian Stellantis workers in contact with the *WSWS Autoworker Newsletter* have, over many months, described steadily deteriorating working conditions at the Windsor and also the Brampton assembly operations. Overcrowded and poorly maintained washrooms, the impossibility of maintaining proper social distancing on the line and bottlenecks at plant entry points are common complaints. Initial extended and staggered break programs were quickly dismantled despite worker protests.

These dangerous working conditions, coming on top of decades of wage stagnation, attacks on workplace benefits, and speed-up, have fuelled an unprecedented upsurge of the class struggle across North America. Autoworkers and parts workers at Volvo Trucks, John Deere and Dana rebelled against the UAW over recent months, voting down concessions-filled contracts and organizing courageous strikes. These struggles have been met with enthusiasm throughout the working class, including among workers in Canada, who have sent statements of solidarity.

Unifor is bitterly hostile to these developments. In the fall of 2020, Unifor connived behind the scenes with the management from the Detroit Three to impose sellout contracts. The agreements gave Ford, GM, and Stellantis the power to vastly expand the use of low-paid second- and even third-tier workers. Despite widespread opposition from autoworkers, Unifor rammed through these contracts by presenting only cherry-picked "highlights" and threatening workers with the loss of their livelihoods if they did not keep the Canadian auto sector globally "competitive."

With the consequences of these massive concessions now clear for all to see at Windsor Assembly, Unifor's principal concern is that no organized worker opposition develops to Stellantis' rampant profiteering and the corporatist union-management "partnership" that has imposed the cuts. In a menacingly-worded letter sent shortly after the November 4 explosion, when it was still unclear what had motivated the bomber, Local 444 president Cassidy wrote, "Over the last couple of weeks, there have been some incidents going on in the plant based on anxieties...any lashing out in the facilities cannot and will not be accepted and needs to stop. All our livelihoods depend on the future of the plant."

Cassidy's tirade underscores that Unifor fears it is sitting atop a wave of worker anger that could suddenly erupt into an open struggle for safe, secure jobs for all.

The decisive task facing Windsor Assembly autoworkers is to build a rank-and-file committee to initiate a worker-led counter-offensive against the auto bosses' global restructuring plans. This committee should begin by organizing opposition to the elimination of the second shift at the plant and fighting for the implementation of basic protective measures against COVID-19. Such a struggle will immediately raise the necessity of adopting an international orientation to broaden the fight to all Detroit Three operations in Canada, the United States, and Mexico, and parts plants throughout North America through the establishment of a network of rank-and-file committees. These committees must wage a political struggle against the auto bosses and their backers in capitalist governments around the world, which combines the demand for decent-paying, secure jobs for all with the fight to suppress and eliminate COVID-19.



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