

“Corporations got fat off us. Now we have got to fight.”

Stellantis announces indefinite layoffs for 1,350 Belvidere Assembly Plant workers

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Work at Belvidere Assembly Plant or in the auto industry? We want to hear from you: Fill out the form at the end of the article to tell us about your thoughts on the attack on jobs.

On Friday, Stellantis announced that it would indefinitely lay off 1,350 workers who remain at the Belvidere Assembly Plant in Illinois by February 28, 2023. The attack on Stellantis autoworkers' jobs is the latest attack against workers' jobs as part of a global restructuring of the auto industry ahead of the 2023 contract talks with the United Auto Workers.

The company justified its attack on jobs by citing broader macroeconomic factors and the drive towards electrification by the auto companies. “Our industry has been adversely affected by a multitude of factors like the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the global microchip shortage, but the most impactful challenge is the increasing cost related to the electrification of the automotive market,” Stellantis said in a statement.

“This difficult but necessary action will result in indefinite layoffs, which are expected to exceed six months and may constitute a job loss under the Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification (WARN) Act,” the company added.

“It’s a bunch of BS,” one furious Belvidere assembly worker told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “They are trying to get people scared so those who are eligible to retire will go sign papers to retire. Then they can hire new-hires.”

Predictably, the the United Auto Workers (UAW) union apparatus issued the most perfunctory and hollow statements in response to the threats by the company. UAW Vice President and Director of the Stellantis Department Cindy Estrada said, “We are all deeply angered by Stellantis’ decision to idle the Belvidere Assembly plant without a plan for future product.” Estrada, who has made hundreds of thousands of dollars in income off the backs of UAW rank-and-file members, has helped push one round of concessions after another on autoworkers in the service of management.

UAW President Ray Curry added, “We believe Stellantis

is grossly misguided in idling this plant which has produced profits for the company since 1965. Announcing the closure just a few weeks from the holidays is also a cruel disregard for the contributions of our members from UAW Locals 1268 and 1761. We will fight back against this announcement.”

Far from fighting back, the UAW has overseen the savage attack on the workers at Belvidere. In 2019, the 57-year-old plant employed close to 5,000 people working three shifts producing the Jeep Cherokee.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic, the company has laid off two shifts and destroyed jobs while the UAW has done nothing to defend workers' jobs. The devastating impact of the job cuts has rippled through the region, including for those who work for Stellantis' parts suppliers such as Magna, Syncreon, Android Industries and others. Laid off workers have had to uproot their lives and transfer to Stellantis plants in Michigan or take lower paying jobs in the Belvidere and Rockford metro region.

The cuts have resulted in unsafe working conditions as well. In August, autoworker Travis Baker died after suffering a severe injury at the plant. Workers at the plant reported the company shutting off lights, cutting costs and not spending any money to improve safety and working conditions.

Stellantis made close to \$8 billion in profits in the first half of 2022, up 34 percent from 2021. The company has made record profits to the tune of tens of billions over the past decade. Last year, the company awarded its CEO Carlos Tavares \$20.5 million in salary, more than 300 times the annual income of the average worker. The profits Stellantis made have been generated entirely off the backs of its workers.

In the wake off a \$52 billion merger with the Italian-American Fiat Chrysler and the French PSA, Stellantis has pursued a brutal cost-cutting operation as it seeks to move all production towards electrification, to compete with the

other global auto companies, including Ford, General Motors and Tesla.

In October, Stellantis threatened the jobs of thousands of workers at the Warren Truck Assembly Plant in Detroit. The company blamed workers for absenteeism and defects, warning that the plant, which employed over 5,230 workers, could be closed. Instead of defending the workers, UAW Local 140 President Eric Graham joined the company in scapegoating them.

Stellantis told *Crains* that “all options are on the table” with regards to Belvidere. Heading into 2023 contract negotiations, the auto companies are carrying out a strategy they have used in prior contract battles. They claim that jobs can be “saved” if workers accept further concessions. Corporations like Stellantis are seeking to extract even greater concessions from workers than in previous contracts as they invest billions in capital expenditure in the transition to electric vehicle production.

Moreover, the auto companies are hoping to extract billions in economic ransom in the form of tax cuts from local and state governments, with the promise of retaining jobs—promises that have been repeatedly broken. Illinois’ billionaire Democratic Governor J.B. Pritzker is pushing for subsidies and tax cuts to keep auto jobs in Illinois, both at Belvidere Assembly and Ford’s Chicago Assembly Plant (CAP). The business press has speculated that CAP is also threatened with closure, as Ford pursues electrification. Part of such a deal would include massive attacks on autoworkers imposed with the help of the UAW. The closure of the two assembly plants would have a devastating impact on the lives of tens of thousands of workers, affecting over 36,000 auto-related manufacturing jobs in Illinois.

“They’re going to negatively affect people’s livelihoods,” an angry Belvidere worker told the WSWS. “They’re going to decimate an entire economic area. I can’t survive off unemployment either. It’s not just us—all the suppliers, all the other vendors, all the other businesses that depend on that revenue, on the goods and services they provide.”

He added, “Corporate, big business ways are not our ways. They’re not thinking about us. They’re not worried about how they’re negatively impacting people. Now they’re going to flood the market with a whole bunch of workers that probably will have to settle for something less than what they’re used to.

“George Carlin said it best, it’s the rich against the poor, it’s an exclusive club and we’re not in it. Big corporations and politicians go hand in hand. These are the people who make the rules. Their number one rule is let’s make rules that make money. Their number two rule is don’t break rule number one.

“We’re being pushed into economic slavery. The poor are

forced to serve the rich. There should be a gigantic meeting about this. There should be something done.”

He noted the imposition of a pro-management settlement on railroad workers, who were stripped of their right to strike by President Biden and Congress. “When I heard that they said Congress was going to force the rail workers to take a deal, how does that work? You’re forcing them to take a deal? How can you legitimize that?”

“We have the best union any company can buy,” he said scathingly of the UAW. “Now is the time to stand up, big time. We should shut the country down. Everybody across the United States, we should shut the whole country down. Any and every autoworker, any union, any worker. The one thing I’ve learned, if you got to get their attention we got to hit them in the pocket.

“We the people have the power. They will never believe that until we show them where the power lies until we start acting like it. We as a people are stronger than the corporations and the rich, there’s more of us than them. All of the Stellantis workers should stand with us. All autoworkers should stand with us—Ford, GM, how about the workers in the Teamsters, the teachers, the nurses, the food workers? How about all of us who are getting the shaft—all of us are getting the shaft—fighting back. We are mad as hell and we’re not going to take it. There’s power in numbers.

“It’s 2022, we’re not asking anymore. We as a working class are demanding, we’re standing up against tyranny and oppression of big business and we ain’t asking anymore. We’re going to do something about it. Every hard working person across the US is going to join us. Corporations got fat off us. No more. No more. Now we have got to fight. All across this country there’s been economic injustice against all workers. We need a general strike to shut this country down. Hit them where it hurts most. Their pockets.”

As Will Lehman, a second-tier autoworker at Mack Trucks and UAW presidential candidate, has stressed in his campaign: “This corporate terrorism must not be allowed to take place! I call for the full mobilization of all rank-and-file workers in the UAW to halt any further layoffs or concessions. It is time to draw a line in the sand: The rights of workers must take precedence over private profit!”

Lehman’s campaign called for workers to form a network of rank-and-file committees in every plant, including at Belvidere Assembly Plant, to mount a powerful counteroffensive to defend workers’ jobs and livelihoods.



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