Fight back against the attack on jobs at Stellantis Belvidere Assembly Plant! Mobilize support behind Stellantis workers!

Will Lehman
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Dear Fellow Workers,

Last week, Stellantis announced it would indefinitely idle and lay off over 1,350 workers at its Belvidere Assembly Plant in Illinois starting next February, 2023. The company's threat is the latest attack on workers' jobs in the midst of a global restructuring of the auto industry, as it prepares for the 2023 Big Three contract talks with the United Auto Workers.

Such attacks are unconscionable, as all the auto companies have made record profits for years. What gives them the right to sacrifice our jobs and our livelihoods at their altar of profit? We cannot accept such corporate terrorism any longer and it's high time we fight back, even if the UAW does nothing to fight for us. An injury to workers at Stellantis is an injury to all workers in the auto industry and beyond. We need to link up with our fellow workers at Belvidere and build a rank-and-file movement to fight back for our jobs and lives.

In their press release, Stellantis said that they are preparing for the transition to electrification and blamed other factors like the COVID-19 pandemic and the microchip shortage for their latest attack on jobs at Belvidere. That's the official reason, but the real reason is they want to squeeze the maximum profits out of the workforce.

One worker told my campaign team: "The Stellantis corporate lady came down. She said, 'I'm really sorry to tell you, but you're idled. Everyone's getting a WARN notice.' Everyone was somber, and people were shocked. A couple of guys asked, 'Is there a chance we can get a new car?' She said, 'They're exploring every possibility.'"

So far, no new product has been assigned to Belvidere. The company expects to blackmail workers into accepting further concessions in the 2023 contract talks with the lie that they will keep jobs, or assign a new product to the plant. But such forms of economic blackmail in the form of concessions never turn out well for workers as companies inevitably break their promises.

Additionally, the company hopes to win further cost savings by pitting state and local governments against each other in a bidding war. The billionaire Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker is working behind the scenes to offer Stellantis tax incentives and to subsidize the company to make sure the plant stays in Illinois. Pritzker is also planning to make such overtures to Ford, supposedly to prevent the closure of Ford's Chicago Assembly Plant, which has also not been assigned new electric products so far.

There were close to 5,000 workers working three shifts at the Belvidere plant in 2019. Since the pandemic, the company has ruthlessly cut down the workforce and eliminated two shifts, destroying the lives of thousands of workers, with horrendous ripple effects for the regional economy in a struggling area like Rockford, Illinois. Workers have told me that Rockford was once a booming manufacturing town decades ago, but like many Midwestern industrial towns, the local economy has been ravaged by the corporations.

Former Belvidere workers who lost their jobs had to take up lower-paying jobs in their area or uproot their families and move hundreds of miles to another plant, with no guarantee that they will have continued employment.

The attack on jobs is not just limited to workers at Stellantis in Belvidere. Recently, the company has also threatened thousands of jobs at Warren Truck Assembly in the Detroit area, slandering workers for supposed excess absenteeism and quality issues. Temps at Warren have had their hours cut to the bone and they're transferring full-time workers to other plants, causing a lot of anxiety among workers worried they might also get "bumped."

Before the brutal jobs cuts began, then-president Rory Gamble bragged in 2019 of the deal between the UAW and Fiat Chrysler (the company name prior to the merger that formed Stellantis): "F.C.A. has been a great American success story thanks to the hard work of our members. We have achieved substantial gains and job security provisions

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for the fastest growing auto company in the United States."

So much for the phony promises of the UAW! Who succeeded? Certainly not the workers. The company has seen tens of billions in profits over the past decade from the sweat and toil of Stellantis autoworkers with the help of the UAW imposing concessions contracts, including ramming through another sellout agreement after workers rejected a contract offer in 2015, the first such contract rejection in decades. The current president of Stellantis, Carlos Tavares, is the highest-paid auto exec in the industry, making a record $20.5 million in salary, not counting all his stock options. The company itself made a record $8 billion in profits in the first half of 2022 alone, a 34 percent increase from last year.

In response to the job cuts, Cindy Estrada resorted to pitting Stellantis workers against their coworkers in other countries. Estrada said, "There are many vehicle platforms imported from other countries that could be built in Belvidere with skill and quality by UAW members at Belvidere."

This toxic nationalism of the UAW and Estrada must be opposed, as it pits autoworkers in the same company against each other in different countries. The auto companies have a global strategy as they reorganize the entire industry for electrification on the backs of workers. Industry analysts have projected that millions of jobs could be cut by the auto companies as the different companies seek to dominate the electric car market.

Earlier this year, Stellantis and auto unions in Italy agreed to over 1,820 job cuts, effectively putting 30 percent of auto jobs at risk in Italy. Gianluca Ficco of the UILM union in Italy said such cuts were necessary to enable the company's transition to electric in a "socially acceptable" way. In Canada, Stellantis has scheduled to cut the second shift at its Windsor plant by the end of December with the sanction of the Unifor union. At least 1,800 of the jobs at the Windsor plant of the total 4,300 workers employed there face the prospect of losing their jobs.

The trade union apparatus in each of the countries, including the UAW, Unifor and the various unions in other countries, offer no way forward for workers. The UAW apparatus is committed to its failed and bankrupt nationalist strategy that has not saved the job of a single worker threatened with layoff. What did Stellantis workers get for all the dues they paid? A bankrupt program that continues to fail them. The UAW has no intention of opposing these attacks on jobs and threats to close plants and instead only views such company announcements as another "tough pill to swallow."

But nationalism isn't a tough pill, *it's a poison pill for us workers*. Stellantis workers need a united international strategy to combat these multinational corporations. Every UAW worker should be out on strike over the prospect of Stellantis closing another plant. That is what solidarity means. This strike would need to call for unity with UAW workers currently on strike at CNH and the graduate student workers on strike in California to raise their standard of living as well. The only way forward is to fight alongside our coworkers abroad, not against them in a race to the bottom.

As I warned in my election campaign rally against job cuts and concessions: "It is high time for workers to fight back. This is what my campaign is about: organizing the rank and file to transfer power to the shop floor, abolishing the UAW apparatus that blocks us from fighting and launching a real campaign to defend our interests."

To Stellantis workers: I stand with you and will fight with you. To do so, I urge you to immediately build rank-and-file committees at Stellantis Belvidere, Windsor and in Italy to oppose the company's assault on your jobs. We can mobilize support behind you from autoworkers at other companies as well as workers in other countries and industries, including with rail workers, teachers, health care workers and beyond.

Link up with the newly formed rank-and-file committees at Chicago Ford Assembly Plant, GM Flint Assembly Plant and with committees of workers to mount a fight to defend jobs. The companies have made record profits. If they refuse to give us the right to a good paying job with safe working conditions, they have forfeited their right to be privately run and should be put under the democratic control of workers to meet our needs, and not those of the billionaires.

Sincerely,

William Lehman.

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