

Workers speak out against UAW complicity as Stellantis prepares to shutter Belvidere Assembly

A WSWS Reporting Team
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With the closure of the Stellantis Belvidere Assembly Plant in Illinois near the Wisconsin border slated for February 28, the close to 1,200 remaining workers, who build the Jeep Cherokee models, are scrambling to plan their next steps. The workers have been left on their own by the union and Stellantis to make the gut-wrenching decision whether to uproot and relocate to a Stellantis plant with job openings hundreds of miles away, or file for unemployment benefits while they look for work elsewhere.

In announcing the “idling”, in reality closure of Belvidere in December, Stellantis cited the transition to electric vehicles and the pandemic, as factors necessitating the cessation of operations. Stellantis has also threatened the jobs of thousands of Detroit area workers, including the elimination of the third shift at Warren Truck Assembly.

A statement issued at the time by Will Lehman, candidate for UAW president, declared, “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.”

Campaigners for Will Lehman spoke to workers Monday at shift change outside of Belvidere Assembly. Will’s statement had encouraged workers at the plant to form an independent rank-and-file committee to fight back against the attack on jobs, and mobilize support across the auto industry worldwide where similar attacks are being carried out.

Dan, a worker with more than 10 years at Belvidere Assembly, said that he would need to go on unemployment if the plant closed and then likely need to go back to working in construction. He described how the local union bureaucracy ignored and were hostile to workers who were getting ready to be laid off.

“We are taking it day by day, that’s all we can do. Next

week we could all be gone. When they bought this place, they knew Stellantis was going to do whatever they wanted. And the union here, they don’t tell us anything. They tell us they don’t know anything either.”

“The union’s in bed with Stellantis. The UAW rep who does all the unemployment here when workers can’t figure it out themselves, Michael Moh, he got tired of answering questions at the union hall one day and yelled at someone. He had 1,200 people in one day calling and all asking the same questions.”

He described the conditions in the plant that are both physically and mentally taxing for workers who are left hanging on by a thread by the end of each shift. The conditions at the plant have led to accidents and injuries and even the death of Travis Baker at the plant, in a tragic accident that is still being covered up by the UAW and Stellantis.

“They restructured the jobs on the line to get rid of jobs so we’re running a shift with less than a third of the people who worked here in 2019,” said Dan. “They said they were going to slow the line down to 35 cars an hour, then they started to slowly speed it up and up to 39 cars an hour. We do the same job over and over and we get tired of it. They don’t give a damn about us on the line.”

Stellantis is the product of a merger between US-Italian Fiat Chrysler and France-based Peugeot completed in January 2021. The merger spelled profits for investors and corporate management, but at the expense of jobs, working conditions and wages of workers.

Just one month after the merger, Stellantis fired 150 workers at Belvidere Assembly. Stellantis laid off an entire shift six months later when it moved to one-shift production in July 2021. All of the attacks over the past decade were carried out by the corporations with the help of the UAW, who did nothing to organize a fight back against them and signed contracts behind workers’ backs that they falsely claimed would protect jobs.

Dan expressed strong sentiment in favor of a fight back. “If you could get every blue collar worker in the world together to go on strike together for a week, watch what happens to the one percent [of ruling class families who own the majority of the world’s wealth].”

“They raised our union dues by half an hour of our pay rate eight years ago and we haven’t gotten anything for it. They said it was for a strike, but we never went on strike. When GM went on strike four years ago, why didn’t every plant in the US in the Big Three [US-based auto corporation] go on strike with them? It’s because the UAW is so far in bed with these companies that they’re too far gone. They make too much money while we’re in here working, they don’t give a damn.”

Dan asked how a new leadership in the UAW would get rid of the greed and corruption that dominates the bureaucracy in the face of attempts by management to bribe union leaders. Will Lehman’s supporters explained that his campaign is based on the principle of placing workers themselves back in control through building rank-and-file committees and abolishing the bureaucracy, not placing an individual in power to become a part of the bureaucracy. Dan replied, “I’m all for that.”

One temporary worker at Belvidere said his last day will be Friday. “They haven’t told us anything. Because I’m part-time they are giving me no options I’m pretty much on my own to figure it out” he said. When told about Will Lehman’s call for rank-and-file committees he said, “that’s the way it should be. The UAW told me that because I’m part-time that I couldn’t vote in the election. So, I didn’t even get a say.”

The claim that part-time workers were not eligible to vote was a lie spread by UAW officials. It is one of many issues raised by Will Lehman in his protest of the election to the UAW monitor.

A veteran worker shared the difficulties he personally faces should the plant close. “I have been here a long time and am only a few years away from retirement. So, I have to transfer to Detroit or somewhere else if that’s what’s offered. Otherwise, I’ll lose my retirement. My father is 87 years old and lives at home with me. My wife and I, who also works, take turns caring for him. It can be very difficult, but we don’t want to put him in a home. But if I have to transfer, I might be forced to. I just don’t know where I’ll end up.”

The consequences of the closure of Belvidere Assembly, a major employer in the area, will reverberate throughout the Midwest, as workers leave and small businesses in the community struggle for customers and sales. The Belvidere Assembly closure will undoubtedly affect jobs at parts suppliers, which will likely lay off 731 employees working

at seven suppliers in Boone, Stephenson and DeKalb counties that produce parts or provide services for the Jeep Cherokee. Adient, Android Industries, Cassens Transport Co., Magna Exteriors, Nova Wildcat Shur-Line, Yanfeng Automotive Interiors and Syncreon, a logistics firm that synchronizes parts for BAP located next to it, have all notified the Illinois Department of Commerce that layoffs will ensue.

Campaigners spoke to two other veteran workers at shift change, who described their situation resulting from the company’s decision to close the plant and the UAW’s lack of program to fight back.

“I have to move on, I have to retire,” said one.

“Unfortunately, I’m going to have to move,” said another.

“So where do you go?” the first worker responded to her coworker. “When I hear things, it’s not from the UAW, it’s from friends. We don’t hear things from the UAW at all. We’re just waiting for them to say something, and it will probably be at the last minute, so what can you expect? People were signing the contract in 2019 because we were told that it was going to be great. Well, it wasn’t great.”

“We hear from people outside the plants about what’s going on, we don’t hear anything here. We’ve seen this campaign before,” he said pointing to the leaflet. “I agree, we can’t have any more shutdowns.”

The attacks at Belvidere are part of a global process. They are not confined to just one company or even one country. This year, Stellantis workers in Italy are also fighting for their jobs, and autoworkers at Ford in Germany are fighting job cuts as well. Caterpillar workers in the US have overwhelmingly supported strike action to fight against the plans for restructuring that would lead to job losses, the lowering of wages in the face of record-high inflation and the further stripping back safety measures.

To fight the threat to their jobs workers must coordinate their struggle on a global basis. This requires workers mobilize independently of the existing corrupt and bureaucratic union structures.

We encourage Belvidere workers to read Will Lehman’s statement and contact the campaign to learn more about how they can form an independent rank-and-file committee to link up with other workers to stop the plant closures and layoffs.



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