

Stellantis begins indefinite idling of Belvidere Assembly in a major assault on autoworkers

George Marlowe
2 March 2023

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 Tuesday, Stellantis began to indefinitely idle its Belvidere Assembly Plant in Illinois and lay off the over 1,300 workers who remain there, destroying their lives and uprooting families. The emptying out of the plant will also have devastating ripple effects on the already economically ravaged areas surrounding the town of Belvidere and the nearby Rockford metropolitan area.

The attack of Belvidere Assembly workers by Stellantis is a shot across the bow ahead of the 2023 contracts as Ford, GM and Stellantis accelerate their global restructuring plans towards electrification by cutting costs, shutting down plants and destroying jobs.

One veteran worker at Belvidere told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “A lot of the people at my plant had transferred in from St. Louis and other areas, and they do not want to uproot and move again. My years at this plant have been a roller coaster ride. Every second of every day is filled with uncertainty. The UAW never told us anything.”

At the exit meeting held Wednesday by the company and the union, the worker found out that “there’s no transfers open, and we have to wait to see how many here sign up. Then they’ll offer the buyouts at other plants, then go from there. There’s nowhere for these people to go! And they’re threatening to shut down other plants. First, they said everyone will go to Warren [Truck Assembly in suburban Detroit]. Then they canceled that. Now they’re threatening to shut down Warren from what I’m hearing. There’s nowhere for people to go. Now people with lots of years are going to be screwed.”

The worker described the harrowing impact the idling will have on families. “I don’t think my child will be very happy if his dad has to transfer to keep his pension. It’s not a decision any parent should have to make after 25-plus years with the same company. You can’t just give up what you’ve worked for, but you can’t just leave your kid behind either. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with this plant, one of the highest quality, most productive and most reliable plants Stellantis has. Just shows what corporate greed is and how ruthless they are.”

The Belvidere plant has been in operation since 1965, first

under Chrysler, then Daimler-Chrysler and Fiat-Chrysler and the latest merger under Stellantis. As late as 2019, the plant employed over 5,000 workers. After the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Stellantis began a process of ruthless job cuts, eliminating two shifts and setting the stage for the closure of the plant. The ripple effects of the job cuts will affect not just Stellantis Belvidere Assembly workers but hundreds of workers at the parts suppliers at Syncreon, Adient, Android, Grupo Antolin and SBM Management, many of whom are members of United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 1268.

Earlier in January, Stellantis CEO Carlos Tavares threatened to close more plants globally. Tavares, who was awarded over \$24 million in total compensation in 2022, warned if market conditions worsened, the company will not “need so many plants,” and “unpopular decisions” will have to be made.

As the Belvidere Assembly plant began to idle Tuesday, Tavares claimed he would be “looking for a solution” to keep the plant open but stated the high costs of producing EV vehicles were a barrier. In a teleconference with reporters, Tavares said, “We need to find a solution for the fact that the technology that has been decided is 40 percent more expensive” than its combustion engine counterparts.

Electric vehicles require fewer overall parts than combustion engine cars and the auto companies are looking to drastically reduce wages at any EV-producing plants. Stellantis is aiming to electrify 50 percent of its US car sales by 2030. But what the auto industry has in store for autoworkers can be seen in Ford’s opening of a new battery plant in Michigan which will pay near-poverty wages, topping out at \$20 an hour.

In justifying the assault on Belvidere workers’ jobs, Stellantis has cited a 55 percent drop in sales in 2022 of the Jeep Cherokee produced at Belvidere, along with shortages of parts and microchips due to the global pandemic and other market disruptions.

For its part, the UAW leadership issued a hypocritical and nationalistic statement Tuesday on the idling of Belvidere Assembly. UAW President Ray Curry said, “Stellantis’ ill-advised decision will have negative repercussions throughout the region and supplier network.” Nonetheless, Curry and the UAW have done nothing to defend workers’ jobs. Instead, the UAW has sought to induce the company to remain with the

help of the Biden administration and the billionaire Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker, who has offered the company billions in tax subsidies. Curry was also in talks with Biden to provide the company with federal tax subsidies.

While UAW Region 4 Director Brandon Campbell stated, “[t]he corporation has benefited from numerous and generous subsidies, federal loans, grants and tax abatement,” the UAW has enabled this process of economic blackmail and extortion by the company, which has only led to the continuous destruction of the jobs and livelihoods of workers at Belvidere Assembly and other Stellantis plants in the United States. This includes the elimination of the third shift at Warren Truck and job cuts at engine plants in Trenton and Dundee, Michigan, and several stamping plants.

Far from mounting a fight against Stellantis, Campbell declared in the UAW statement that the company and the union would instead try to push out the workforce with retirement packages and voluntary terminations. He said, “We have immediately addressed the concerns of the 2,300 affected employees by negotiating with the company on retirement packages, voluntary termination, as well as pre-retirement leaves to allow employees to grow into their retirement. We are also working with interested members on the relocation process.”

Campbell added that the union would do absolutely nothing to defend the workers at the parts suppliers for Belvidere stating, “The options are much more limited for the supplier network, which includes UAW members as well as the community at large.”

The veteran Belvidere worker said, “The UAW doesn’t want anybody to know anything. That Curry guy we’ve never seen or heard anything at all. The new VP showed up for the exit meeting Wednesday. But that’s a little too late. We’ve had nobody from the UAW leadership here. We’ve gotten no answers and gotten absolutely nothing. It’s just, ‘Hey, we’re idling you, and that’s that.’ And this company is so cutthroat.”

Campbell, who was an official out of Belvidere previously, did not show up at the exit meeting and was denounced by workers. “He sold out his own people,” the veteran worker said scathingly, “here in his own plant during the contract that screwed my group of people and threw us into Tier 2! He negotiated that contract!

“One guy stood up and just went off on the entire group about him not being there and how we voted him in and got him to where he is just to not show up at the idling of his own plant! That man got a long, long round of applause! The union made excuses, and this guy went off again and got another round of applause!”

The bankruptcy of the UAW bureaucracy was summed up in its thoroughly nationalistic statement claiming that the idling of Belvidere “raises questions about Stellantis’ commitment to the US. ... US taxpayers who subsidize Stellantis deserve better. And US consumers deserve better.”

In fact, the assault on jobs by Stellantis is part of a global process. Earlier in February, the company announced it would lay off over 700 of its 2,500 workers at its plant in Sochaux, France, which currently has 1,000 temporary workers. The union bureaucrats at the French plant have done nothing to protect the workers’ jobs.

Similar attacks have begun in Italy where the company and the auto unions have agreed to over 1,800 job cuts. The attack on jobs is not limited to Stellantis either, with Ford laying off thousands of workers in the US and Europe and GM announcing 500 white collar job cuts as well.

The nationalist strategy of the UAW and its counterparts in other countries allows the company to carry out its global strategy of pitting workers in one country against another in a race to the bottom.

Last June while rumors swirled that Belvidere would get a new electric product, the company pit US and Canadian workers against each other. Then it announced it would produce the EV Chargers and Challengers at a plant in Windsor, Ontario, where it had previously slashed thousands of jobs.

In the upcoming contract battle, rank-and-file workers must demand the reopening of the Belvidere plant and the restoration of all jobs with no loss in pay or benefits. Stellantis has made tens of billions in profits from the labor of its workforce and this should go the workers, not to the shareholders or executive management.

Belvidere workers should take up the call by Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for UAW president Will Lehman to join the expanding network of autoworker rank-and-file committees that are fighting to transfer decision-making power from the corrupt UAW apparatus to the workers on the shop floor.

These committees are fighting to mobilize workers in the US and internationally to oppose all plant closings and layoffs, reduce the workweek with no loss in pay to adjust to the fewer work hours needed for electric vehicle production and to fight for inflation-busting wage increases, an end to the tier system, the restoration of pensions and cost-of-living protections.

In this way, Belvidere workers can link up with the fight of other sections of autoworkers, Caterpillar workers and other rank-and-file committees at the Chicago Ford Assembly Plant, GM Flint Assembly and other plants to organize the fight to defend the right to a secure and good-paying job for all.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact