

Stellantis Belvidere trades worker speaks out against plant closure, UAW and media silence

Jessica Goldstein
4 July 2023

To discuss joining or forming a rank-and-file committee, or to share your thoughts on your working conditions, fill out the form at the end of the article.

In the months since international automaker Stellantis announced the “indefinite idling” of its Belvidere, Illinois, Jeep assembly plant in March, media outlets have largely moved on from the topic and the disastrous impact it has had on the lives of thousands of workers.

Stellantis revealed in December 2022 that it would be stopping production at the plant by March 2023, eliminating the one remaining shift and some 1,300 jobs, forcing workers to uproot their families and transfer hundreds of miles away if they wished to remain with the company. As recently as 2019, the factory had employed nearly 5,000 workers across three shifts, and hundreds more worked at nearby suppliers such as Syncreon, Magna and Android. The plant had been one of the few sources of relatively higher-paying jobs in the Rockford area, which has suffered decades of deindustrialization.

The shuttering of the Belvidere plant is part of a global onslaught on autoworkers’ jobs, which is accelerating with the transition to electric vehicles (EVs) and the upcoming contract expirations for 178,000 Big Three autoworkers in the US and Canada in September. Stellantis alone has announced plant closures or mass layoffs at facilities in Austria, Slovakia, Italy and the US this year, while Ford and GM have been shedding thousands of jobs through layoffs or buyouts.

Both United Auto Workers union officials and Democratic Party politicians, including billionaire Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker, have postured as fighting for the future of the Belvidere plant. Pritzker and state officials have offered the company massive tax handouts in an effort to persuade it to assign production of a new EV model to the factory. UAW officials, meanwhile, are preparing to offer Stellantis CEO Carlos Tavares brutal concessions to workers’ wages and benefits in the name of “saving jobs.”

According to Belvidere workers, the company has been ordering the few employees who remain to dismantle assembly equipment for months, so that it can be shipped to its facilities elsewhere.

A skilled trades worker at Stellantis Belvidere, who asked to remain anonymous, told the WSWs, “The plant is not idled, because we’re still tearing their machines out. At Belvidere Assembly, we’re down to under 100 workers in skilled trades. We are tearing the machines apart wire by wire, and we also had a contract team come in to help tear four machines apart. We’re tearing down to send parts to the Windsor plant in Canada.

“I work in skilled trades. To see something like the plant be built up and then torn up and thrown away is disgusting. We went from 4,500 to 100 workers. We heard nothing from the governor [of Illinois J.B. Pritzker] nor the president [of the US Joe Biden].”

As auto industry observers have noted, even if Stellantis were to reopen the Belvidere plant, it would likely be many months, if not years, before it would be retooled in preparation for the production of electric vehicles and would almost certainly employ far fewer workers than at its height. Moreover, by the time the plant reopened, it would be with a younger and much lower paid workforce, with many veteran workers likely to have moved away, or forced into early retirement or other careers. This reality has been kept entirely concealed from workers by the UAW bureaucracy.

The worker who spoke to the WSWs gave a snapshot of workers’ experiences at Belvidere with the UAW leadership. There is widespread mistrust of the UAW bureaucracy by the workers they supposedly represent. Decades of concessions contracts and a vast network of corruption in the apparatus have begun to reveal the pro-corporate nature of the union bureaucracy to rank-and-file workers.

“The union is hiding,” he said. “We just had an election for union officials, even though the plant is closing. Our committeeman has a job with the higher-ups in Detroit and only cares about himself. In the last contract, we got a 3 percent raise after 10 years without a raise.” With these wage cuts, he added that it puts workers in a difficult position where they must delay retirement after years of backbreaking labor.

During the protracted period of layoffs before the idling was officially announced, the UAW and their counterparts in the AFL-CIO did not lift a finger to fight the job cuts nor did they mobilize their millions of members in a common struggle against the plant shutdown.

“The temporary part-timers [TPTs] are another issue the union hasn’t stood up for,” he continued. “With the TPTs, some of them took four years to get seniority, and there was a very high number of people who were TPTs at the plant. When I started, it was totally different than it was today. Stewards used to at least greet you every day on the floor and ask if there were any problems. Now stewards hide in their offices and you feel like you aren’t represented.

“I was being cross-trained when the news broke about the bribes from Chrysler to UAW officials [Fiat-Chrysler merged with the PSA Group in 2021 to form Stellantis]. The UAW said that certain workers were going to train to be electricians, but they stopped that program because they ran out of money. And then I knew it was because someone was taking it. The [UAW-Chrysler] joint training center was completely empty when I visited except for a couple of classrooms, one which I was being trained in. There was no cafeteria or anything. It was never offered up for use by our plant.”

The worker described a sight common for all auto production workers at Big Three automaker plants across the US.

“Our parking lot is full of other cars. Some are going out—Wranglers, Gladiators, whatever Stellantis makes. It doesn’t make sense that people can afford these cars that cost \$500 a month to pay off. They’re stockpiling in case there’s a strike.”

In recent weeks, Stellantis has moved to put a number of its US assembly facilities in “critical plant status,” allowing it to mandate 12-hour shifts, seven days a week.

Conditions are becoming increasingly intolerable for workers in auto manufacturing. Everywhere, workers are struggling to pay for basic living costs on wages whose value has substantially eroded with every contract.

The consequence is that workers are moving into struggle and are seeking a way to fight back collectively against further plant closures and wage cuts, and to recoup the losses imposed at the hands of the corporations and union bureaucracies. Last fall, supporters of Will Lehman—a Mack Trucks worker and socialist candidate for UAW president—visited the Belvidere plant, urging workers to link up across the auto industry in a network of rank-and-file committees to defend jobs and fight concessions.

In April, the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC)—an international organization of militant workers’ committees—released a statement calling for coordinated action by all UAW members to stop plant closings and mass layoffs.

Most recently, workers at UPS facilities across the US voted by 97 percent to strike in June, and 7,500 dockworkers in Canada and 15,000 hotel workers in Southern California launched strike action. These are just a few expressions of the desire to fight that is building throughout the international working class, causing great anxiety to the corporate ruling class worldwide.

“It’s all about money”

“I understand corporations are there to make money, but they still need to provide workers with a living wage,” the Belvidere skilled trades worker said. “Today it seems even more that corporations are doing away with that. What I make now compared to where I started is astronomically different.

“My wages have been cut in half. It was a big cut when we lost Cost-of-Living Adjustments (COLA), and if they didn’t cut that, we might have a livable wage. I know they made record profits, and even with our profit sharing pay, it’s a huge disparity with what the company made.

“At first when it was announced, people I talked to didn’t understand why it was being shut down. It looked great because the company revamped the plant after Dart production ended. They turned it into a showplace with new lighting on the taxpayers’ dollar. But it’s all about money. The governor didn’t give them the money they needed for their infrastructure. But they will never be satisfied, because they can’t ever make enough money. Within six months of the CEO saying that the cost of EVs would not be passed onto consumers, they announced Belvidere was closing.

“They were posting signs in the plant that said ‘#2 in quality in the Americas and #3 in the world,’ and someone wrote ‘meaningless’ on the sign. Now they are taking our lights, our lockers, everything and shipping them to other plants.”

Contrary to the manner in which it is often portrayed by the political

establishment and in the media, plant closures do not simply affect workers at the facility in question. The capitalist economy of global production for private profit has created a complex network of workers who are connected all over the world through the same productive process. The way forward for workers to fight the threat of unemployment and wage cuts requires an international solution, against the strategy of the ruling class and the trade union bureaucracy to pit workers in other countries against each other for low-paying jobs.

Nor is it a positive experience for workers in other countries when capitalists shift production from one country to another. The Belvidere worker described the ripple effect that the closure of one plant has on the lives and working conditions of workers in the community and in other parts of the world.

“I talked to one of the engineers in Canada, and he said it was a complete mess. The robotics we’ve had since 2012 came from St. Louis and Delaware after they leveled those plants. We fixed and repaired them daily. The machines that run in one plant will not just run in another without problems. They think they’re going to make old equipment work, and it’s going to fail.

“We knew it was going to close. They cut shifts and our exports went way down. They started to produce the [Jeep] Cherokee in Europe, and that really hurt us. They lost 4,500 people, that’s a ton of manufacturing jobs. They are building a Walmart distribution center in the Belvidere area, and there’s a General Mills distribution center that opened. It affects the community the way the economy is changing.”

The WSWs urges workers to take the struggle into their own hands through building rank-and-file committees to fight under an independent political program against the corporations for their demands, including an end to plant closures and layoffs.

The worker stated his appreciation for the WSWs, noting, “I’ve been trying to get someone to take this seriously. I reached out to the *Detroit News* and a local station, and no one talked to me. They’re hiding the truth of what’s really going on. The WSWs is the first one to call back.”



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact