

# Autoworkers at General Motors' CAMI plant in Canada forced to rely on food banks during electric vehicle transition

Carl Bronski  
20 July 2023

A shocking recent report by CTV News's London, Ontario, bureau highlighted the struggles of autoworkers at the General Motor's CAMI assembly plant in the nearby town of Ingersoll to make ends meet. Workers endure drastically reduced pay due to the transition to electric vehicle (EV) production, and must rely on food banks.

"I noticed a co-worker not having lunches at work," veteran CAMI worker Jessica Swarts told CTV. The family "told me that, unfortunately, they'd been waiting for back-pay for so long that they had no money for groceries. They had utilized food banks to feed their children but there was no money left for groceries."

The plight of her colleague was not an isolated one. Since the plant was idled in April 2021 when production of the internal combustion Chevy Equinox crossover ended, workers have seen take-home income further diminished as GM moved to re-tool the facility for EV production.

Such has been the hardships experienced by many workers at the plant that Swarts and others created a charity grocery program, called Camily Funds for Food. The crisis facing many CAMI autoworkers and their families has significantly deepened with the transition to EV production, but the downward trajectory began to pick up steam a number of years ago.

Since the union bureaucrats led by now disgraced former president Jerry Dias sabotaged a month-long 2017 strike by inciting Canadian nationalism that divided CAMI workers from their class brothers and sisters producing the Equinox in Mexican plants, the Ingersoll workforce declined by almost one third from 2,800 to 1,900. More intermittent layoffs in the fall of 2019 were followed by a full spring 2020 closure in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Then, in the ensuing months, supply chain difficulties forced even more intermittent layoffs lasting into early 2021.

After the last Equinox rolled off the line in April 2021, all workers were laid off long-term as the \$800 million EV retrofit began. The workers then drew on Employment Insurance (EI) premiums with some receiving a period of inferior Supplemental Unemployment Benefit (SUB) 'top ups' until

partial EV production was ready to start in December of last year.

The re-start initially involved only about 700 workers producing the "build to order" BrightDrop Zevo 600 van for FedEx. Series production plans for the smaller Zevo 400 model were initially scheduled for mid-year but were subsequently bumped back until late 2023. BrightDrop is a wholly owned subsidiary of GM.

As the re-start got under way, workers who had formerly worked on one of three shifts began alternating, each shift working two weeks and then going on layoff for four weeks. Then in early spring everyone was laid off for another month.

Workers' Employment Insurance eligibility had already been exhausted during the lengthy retrofit downtime. Some top up payment relief had been available but the hurdles to receive it had caused many workers to go as long as nine weeks without any money at all. Even now, most workers have been laid off throughout July and advised once again to seek employment insurance relief.

With Unifor, GM and the financial press ballyhooing the advent of EV production since the run-up to the last CAMI-Unifor contract in January 2021, the 170,000 autoworkers in all the other operations of the Detroit Three in Canada and the United States who face—or will face—EV retooling programs, would do well to learn the lessons of the CAMI experience as their own contracts come up for renewal this September.

Today, all the auto corporations are in a furious competition to restructure their operations, slashing costs and shedding jobs, in order to dominate the markets and technologies for electric vehicles. The companies fully intend to fund the transition to EVs while maintaining their gargantuan profits by increasing workers' exploitation, whether by keeping wages below inflation, lengthening the workday, increasing production quotas or other means. Already, Ford Motor CEO Jim Farley has warned that the production of electric vehicles requires about 40 per cent less workers than the production of the same number of vehicles with an internal combustion engine.

Unifor agreed to the re-opening of the contract at CAMI

prematurely in early 2021 in order to lay the groundwork for one of the first major EV refits of a North American assembly plant. The three-year deal expires in January 2024, only months after all other Detroit Three operations in the US and Canada are meant to sign new collective agreements.

On January 17, 2021, a quickly assembled union Zoom contract ratification meeting amounted to a carefully planned ambush of the CAMI workforce by the local and national union bureaucracies in collaboration with GM management, and Canada's federal and Ontario governments. Their common goal, which they accomplished through a combination of blackmail, threats, backroom conspiring, and concealment, was to slash GM's labour costs at the plant so the auto giant could rake in bumper profits as it transitions to the production of electric vehicles.

Workers learned that Unifor had agreed to give GM a free hand to determine staffing levels and working conditions at the plant. The self-serving contract "Highlights" brochure contained no written details on the impact of the proposed deal on work rules, scheduling, downtime layoffs and ultimate staffing levels. In order to stampede the membership toward ratification, Plant Chairman Mike Van Boekel and Unifor Local 88 President Joe Graves painted a dire picture of the ultimate demise of the current operation if the new arrangements were rejected.

There would be no guarantee of final employment or production numbers, they told the workers. There would be significant changes to work rules and job classifications. However, a new "Competitive Operating Agreement" with all the details could not yet be announced. Due to an imminent retooling, much of the plant would be idled but the extent and length of layoffs could not yet be predicted. Team sizes would continue to be reduced, they said.

Moreover, skilled-trades jobs would ultimately be on the chopping block. The brochure explained, "The parties acknowledged that there were still many unknowns regarding the new operations." To hedge their bets on final staffing levels, early retirement packages were offered. This would also clear the books of many first tier workers earning the highest pay and benefits. Workers that would be hired after production began to pick up in subsequent years would come in as lower paid second tier workers and temporary part-time employees. Fearing for their jobs and seeing that Unifor was not going to organize a fight for a better deal, workers voted to accept the contract.

In Canada, the Ford assembly operation in Oakville, Ontario, is slated to begin its \$1.8 billion transition to EV production in the second quarter of 2024. Assembly of the internal combustion Ford Edge and Lincoln Nautilus crossovers will end at that time. Almost \$600 million of the transition costs will be provided by provincial and federal government handouts. About 3,000 workers will be furloughed for at least six months. EV production is estimated to begin in early 2025.

Ford had initially stated that it was hoping to bring back most of its laid off workforce as it projected the manufacture of five EV models. Subsequently, analysts have stated that prediction could be reduced to as few as two models.

At Stellantis, which has assembly operations in Windsor and Brampton, the company has already launched a buyout campaign of veteran office and shop floor workers across North America in preparation for workforce reductions as a result of EV transition programs. Management plans a new Windsor based \$4.9 billion EV battery plant plus a \$3.6 billion investment for EV transition at its two assembly plants. Windsor Unifor Local 444 president Dave Cassidy has confirmed that current employment numbers will be reduced after the transition.

Much has been made of plans to build a stand-alone battery production plant in Windsor that could employ up to 2,500 workers by late 2024. Volkswagen has a similar plan for its own battery plant in St. Thomas. Both operations will be supported by billions in provincial and federal subsidies and outright grants. The experience of workers at a new joint GM-LG Ultium Cells plant in Lordstown, Ohio, shows how the auto magnates see such ventures as low-wage profit centers. GM has already recognized the UAW at the Ohio facility. Workers there make only US\$16.50 an hour and top out at around \$20, \$10 an hour less than top pay for full-time, first tier GM workers.

For the first time since 1999, the contracts for autoworkers at the Detroit Three in Canada will expire at the same time as those in the US, presenting an extraordinary opportunity for a powerful, internationally coordinated contract fight. But both the UAW and Unifor act as the junior partners of the auto companies and work to suppress the legitimate demands of their memberships in favour of the profits of the corporations. Both unions have decades of experience in inciting Canadian and American nationalism to pit autoworkers against each other in a race to the bottom in wages and conditions and block a unified struggle of workers across North America, including Mexico, to defeat the auto bosses.

To ensure a clear victory for workers in the coming struggle, autoworkers must form and build at every factory rank-and-file committees acting independently of the nationalist and pro-corporate union bureaucracies. An industry-wide network of such committees will provide the necessary organizational framework for a coordinated, unified fight by all workers for higher wages and decent working conditions and will prepare the ground for an international strike by Ford, GM and Stellantis workers across North America.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**