

UAW colludes in Forvia closure of Highland Park, Michigan plant

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In a Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification (WARN) sent to the State of Michigan on July 17, auto parts supplier Forvia announced the imminent closure of its Highland Park, Michigan, plant. The closure of the plant which produces seating for the Jeep Wagoneer sport utility vehicle will affect 511 workers.

The announcement comes just eight months after Forvia sent a similar WARN notice, originally dated November 30, 2022, and later updated on January 31, 2023, to announce the closure of the metals department within the same Highland Park plant. The metals department was responsible for the construction and framing of the seats for the Jeep Wagoneer. The closure of the department followed the elimination of the third shift at the Stellantis Warren Truck Assembly Plant (WTAP) where the Wagoneer is manufactured, and resulted in the permanent layoff of 268 temporary employees as the work was relocated to a Forvia plant in Monterrey, Mexico.

The closure comes as an “amicable resolution” between Forvia (formerly Faurecia) and Stellantis that allows the “continuation of the Seat Frame activity, relocated in Monterrey (Mexico)” and the “termination of the Just-in-time business as from September 30, 2023,” according to a July 27 press release.

The job cuts by Forvia take place as automotive suppliers are preparing for the impact of a possible strike against one or all three of the Big Three auto companies. In a report in *Crain’s Detroit Business*, Glenn Stevens, an industry consultant, said, “They’re all preparing to various degrees,” in regard to the Center for Automotive Research Management Briefing Seminars in Traverse City. “If you’re not anticipating that, you’re flying blind, and companies aren’t doing that.”

Workers have largely been left in the dark as to the details of the Forvia closure. In an email to the *Detroit News*, a company spokesperson said, “the company is encouraging workers to apply for open positions at its

other Metro Detroit operations.”

It cannot be overstated the degree to which United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 155, which “represents” the workers whose livelihoods are on the chopping block, is fully complicit in this attack on workers. In December 2022, then UAW Local 155 Vice President Waymon Halty spoke with *Automotive News* regarding the closure of the metals department, noting complacently, “it was a cost saving decision made a couple years ago.”

A couple years ago? The Local leadership knew of the closure of a major department, employing over 250 workers, for over a year and did nothing! How long has the union known of the impending closure? What has the union done to notify workers and organize opposition? Word has gotten around on the shop floor, but not a single post has been made on the Local 155 Facebook page.

One day after the initial layoff announcement last December, a tragic shooting took place at the plant. Though apparently not directly related to the jobs cuts, the incident speaks to the enormous social tensions at the plant.

At the time, Local 155 responded to the layoffs by promoting anti-Mexican chauvinism in an effort to deflect blame for its own treachery.

These types of decisions are not made overnight. *Automotive News* reported that significant changes in the Wagoneer seating program were known at least since April. “The Jeep seating business is being picked up by seating competitor Lear Corp., which said in an earnings presentation in April that it won a conquest award to supply complete seats for the Wagoneer and Grand Wagoneer launching in late 2023.”

In order to fully understand the forces aligned against the Forvia workers and to develop a strategy to oppose this and future attacks, it is necessary to examine the circumstances around the closure in relation to the history of the Highland Park plant itself, and to place that within

the broader context of the deep changes in the global auto industry associated with the transition to electric vehicles (EVs).

Highland Park is an enclave which, along with neighboring Hamtramck, is entirely surrounded by the city of Detroit. The now-impooverished city has a history of auto production that spans over a century. The Forvia plant located at 1300 Oakland Park Boulevard is located at the north end of the former site of the Chrysler world headquarters. It is located about one mile from the Highland Park Ford Plant which was the site of the first moving assembly line. The 150 acre “brownfield” was redeveloped into eight factory and warehouse spaces by Stuart Frankel Development Co. after Chrysler relocated its headquarters to Auburn Hills, Michigan, in 1996. The Oakland Park development has since been a major hub for auto parts production.

The plant has long been the site of seating production serving as a just-in-time (JIT) supplier for the many Big Three assembly plants in Detroit and the metropolitan area. Before Forvia, the plant was operated by Integrated Manufacturing & Assembly (IMA), a joint venture between Lear Corporation and Comer Holdings. Forvia, through its predecessor Faurecia, has operated the plant since 2019. Faurecia received a \$2 million grant of state funds from the Michigan Economic Development Corporation in late 2019 for a planned \$10.7 million investment in the plant and the “creation” of 500 jobs.

The Highland Park plant still maintains the Faurecia moniker. Significantly, the sign on the building at 1300 Oakland Park Blvd. was never upgraded to a permanent installation over the four years Faurecia/Forvia has operated the plant. To this day, a temporary banner is mounted over the former location of the IMA sign. This raises the question if the entire operation was planned by Faurecia executives as a temporary enterprise from the outset.

France-based Faurecia had been a subsidiary of PSA and became independent only with the formation of Stellantis through the merger of PSA with Fiat Chrysler in 2021. Faurecia formally changed its name to Forvia in February 2022 after completing the acquisition of German lighting company HELLA on January 31, 2022. Forvia claims the merger created the seventh-largest auto parts supplier.

The innumerable auto parts suppliers that began spinning off from the original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) in the late 1990s and early 2000s have been in a perpetual state of flux with near constant bankruptcies,

mergers, acquisitions and joint ventures. The announcement of the closure of the Forvia plant in Highland Park is only one expression of a renewed shakeup as the suppliers react to the changing demands of the OEMs as the global auto industry shifts to “mobility” and the proliferation of EVs. *Automotive News* reported that Stellantis CEO Carlos Tavares warned, “suppliers must work to cut costs as the automaker tries to compete against lower-priced Chinese EVs.”

Throughout this process, the UAW has worked in tandem with Forvia and other auto parts makers at the supplier park, such as Magna and Johnston Controls, to ensure low-cost production and prevent strikes. Time and again the Local 155 leadership, like the national leadership of the UAW in Solidarity House, have demonstrated they are concerned only with maintaining their privileged position.

To advance their independent interests, Forvia workers must form rank-and-file committees independent of both the company and the UAW. The struggle for the defense of jobs and improvement of working conditions cannot be fought on the level of the individual plant or company.

The location of the Forvia Highland Park plant in the Oakland Park complex can be used to the advantage of the Forvia workers as they initiate their struggle. Workers should follow the example of the courageous workers in Matamoros, Mexico, in 2019 and send delegations to the neighboring plants of Magna, Yanfeng, Valeo Avancez, Mobis, Modular Automotive Systems and the other warehouses that line the boulevard.

The unity of auto parts workers in a common fight across company lines at these key plants could bring a substantial portion of the auto industry to a standstill. This fight in defense of jobs and safe working conditions would be welcomed by autoworkers in the Big Three as they enter a contract fight in September.

The newly formed committees should adopt the demands advanced by the Autoworkers Rank-and-File Committee Network in their July 9 statement as an important step in their own fight.



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