

Strike deadline looms at GM's CAMI plant in Ingersoll, Ontario as contract set to expire for 1,200 workers September 17

Carl Bronski
15 September 2024

Master bargaining for a new contract between Unifor Local 88 and General Motors management at the Ingersoll, Ontario CAMI auto assembly plant began last week. The previous contract will expire on the evening of September 17, placing about 1,200 workers in an immediate strike position. Workers voted in late August by 97 percent to mandate a strike should a new agreement not be reached.

The union contract at CAMI has usually been settled about one year after deals at all the other Detroit Three plants in Canada have been concluded, and often has been viewed as an early harbinger for future bargaining in the auto sector. With a significant transition in global auto assembly now underway due to the increasing re-direction of investment into electric vehicle (EV) manufacturing, the experience at CAMI to date should act as a clear and present warning to autoworkers everywhere.

Workers at CAMI Assembly build the Chevrolet BrightDrop EV 600 and EV 400 cargo delivery vans. An additional 200 members are employed at the recently opened Battery Assembly facility and manufacture Ultium battery modules.

The last deal ratified by 91 percent of the CAMI workforce in 2021 was pushed through by Unifor after it suddenly re-opened its contract almost a year early with no consultation with the rank-and-file. With the internal combustion Equinox crossover vehicle slated to be shortly discontinued, workers were told that only a \$1 billion cash infusion to transition to EV production could save their livelihoods. At a snap Zoom meeting, 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 an imminent "deathblow" to the plant if workers failed to ratify the tentative agreement. At the same time, they told the workers there would be no guarantee of final employment or production numbers, and 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.

Three years later, CAMI workers still struggle to secure full-time employment. 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 received Employment Insurance (EI) premiums with some obtaining a period of inferior Supplemental Unemployment Benefit (SUB) "top ups" until partial EV production commenced in December 2022. But when production got up and running, only about 700 workers were called back to produce the "build to order" BrightDrop Zevo 600 van for FedEx. Production plans for the smaller Zevo 400 model were initially scheduled for mid-year but were subsequently bumped back until late 2023.

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 2023, the entire workforce was laid off for another month. With unemployment benefits already running out for workers, many were soon forced to rely on food banks to make ends meet as sporadic layoffs continued. Battery shortages forced another long layoff lasting from October 2023 until this spring. Now, only days away from the expiration of the 2021 contract, workers continue to work for two weeks and then rotate two weeks off.

A worker at the plant who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* in September 2023 when the latest long-term layoff was announced, said that it was estimated that they had only worked 70 weeks in the last three years. "People have had it bad for the last three years," he explained. "There are a lot of married couples who work in the plant and they are both going to lose their jobs. People who have mortgages and kids are in big trouble. There is a Supplemental Unemployment Benefit (SUB) program for people depending on how much you work. But many people have already burned through their supplementary pay."

Few veteran "legacy" workers remain at CAMI. The years prior to the 2021 re-tooling saw a wave of retirements and the hiring of more and more second-tier workers with inferior wages, benefits and pensions. GM management's onslaught on the workforce was facilitated by the Unifor union, which is in a corporatist partnership with the auto bosses and the federal and Ontario

governments.

The Unifor bureaucracy, 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 initially 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 during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Then, in the ensuing months, supply chain difficulties forced even more intermittent layoffs lasting into early 2021.

The “bill of goods” fraudulently sold to the CAMI membership by Unifor, GM and the Ontario and federal governments who ballyhooed the move into EV production and provided a good share of the funding, was subsequently pedaled to GM, Stellantis and Ford workers in the 2023 negotiations. Workers at Windsor Assembly also face extensive layoffs, with further uncertainty in the coming months, as the company establishes separate lines for EV, hybrid and internal combustion engine vehicle production. So brazen was Unifor’s betrayal of their members that some workers were taken in by the fraudulent posturing of UAW leader Shawn Fain, a close ally of the Biden administration who forced through equally ruthless attacks on American autoworkers in 2023 while spouting militant rhetoric.

Workers at Stellantis’ Brampton Assembly plant were expected to be on layoff for much of the length of the three year 2023 contract, with a shutdown for retooling beginning last January. The first shift is not projected to return to work until the end of 2025, and the third shift only to resume in the latter half of 2026. And at Ford Oakville, management announced in April that it will delay the resumption of production at its assembly plant after planned retooling for electric vehicle production from 2025 until 2027. During the 2023 contract ratification process, thousands of workers had been told to expect only an 8-month shutdown. Even then, the deal only passed by a narrow 54 percent vote, with a majority rejection in Oakville and a rejection by skilled trades across the Ford footprint.

The global auto companies, including the Detroit Three in Canada and the United States, are waging a major onslaught on the workers who labour in their factories. The auto bosses are demanding that the switch-over to EV production be paid for by further reducing labour costs. It is projected that EV production requires only 40 percent of the labour for internal combustion vehicles.

But rather than mobilizing workers in a joint struggle against the Detroit Three on both sides of the border, Unifor is still pumping out the same nationalist poison that has hamstrung autoworkers for generations, thereby splitting the workforce and allowing the companies to “whipsaw” jobs, wages and conditions back and forth across North American borders to the lowest bidder. During the 2023 contract negotiations, when agreements in both the US and Canada were coming due at the same time, Unifor and UAW bureaucrats doubled down on their decades-long effort to pit workers on both sides of the border against each other and prevent a North American-wide struggle by autoworkers against the globally mobile corporations.

Unifor’s role as a cheap-labour contractor for corporate Canada flows directly from the social position of the bureaucrats who staff the union apparatus. Living on their six-figure salaries and lavish expense accounts, Unifor officials have far more in common with corporate executives and government ministers than they do with their members. Fervent advocates of Canadian nationalism and the interests of the capitalist elite, they work to secure a “competitive” advantage for their “own” businesses and investors.

The plight of tens of thousands of workers in the Canadian and US auto plants underscores that the only ones who benefit from the unions’ nationalist bargaining strategies are the corporate executives, who have a free hand to adjust and reduce production as they see fit to boost profits, and the union bureaucrats, who cement their corporatist ties with management and governments.

But conditions are ripe for CAMI workers to spearhead a counteroffensive to secure decent-paying, permanent jobs for all autoworkers. Their contract is expiring under conditions of a major upsurge of the class struggle across North America. Some 33,000 machinists at Boeing have been on strike since Friday at plants in Washington, Oregon and California against similarly miserable working conditions at one of American imperialism’s most important military contractors. In Canada, some 50,000 postal workers are in the midst of a strike vote at Canada Post, while the courageous struggle of rail workers against dangerous conditions was prevented last month only by direct government intervention to rob workers of their right to strike and the collusion of the Teamsters’ union apparatus.

CAMI workers will find broad support for their struggle if they break decisively from the nationalist, pro-capitalist perspective pursued by Unifor. They should build a rank-and-file committee at the Ingersoll plant to seize control of the contract struggle from the well-paid union bureaucrats, and reach out to broader sections of the working class across Canada, the US, Mexico, and internationally. The *World Socialist Web Site* and International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC)—which unites and provides political leadership to such committees across North America, Europe, Asia, and Australia—is ready to assist CAMI workers in this fight. We urge you to fill out the form below to take up this struggle.



To contact the WWSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact