

Thousands laid off at Canadian auto plants as workers pay the price for Trump's trade war

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The fallout from US President Donald Trump's trade war has begun to be harshly felt at the Detroit Three's Canadian auto operations, with thousands of workers placed on layoff last week.

On Friday, General Motors announced that electric van production at its CAMI assembly plant in Ingersoll, Ontario will wind down beginning April 14, so as to "align production schedules with current demand." By the end of the month, all 1,200 workers at the CAMI plant will be laid off until October. When production is slated to restart in the fall only about 700 workers will return to their jobs.

On Monday, April 7, Stellantis "temporarily paused" its operations at its Windsor, Ontario assembly plant for at least two weeks, idling some 4,500 workers. Stellantis also ordered a one month halt in production at its Toluca Assembly Plant in Mexico. These shutdowns have caused the layoff of 900 workers in two supporting transmission plants in Kokomo, Indiana, and at Warren and Sterling Heights stamping plants in Michigan.

Unifor rallies round the banker Carney and trade war

Unifor President Lana Payne in Canada and UAW President Shawn Fain in the United States have doubled down on their reactionary nationalist programs that pit autoworkers against each other. They are working with the auto bosses and, respectively the Canadian and American governments to off-load as many job losses as possible onto the backs of workers outside of their own national borders. The UAW's Fain has offered his full support for the tariffs that the fascist Trump has imposed on auto, steel, and aluminum imports. Unifor, meanwhile, is backing the retaliatory tariffs announced by Canada's new Liberal Prime Minister, the former central banker and corporate boss Mark Carney.

Payne and Carney are not opposed to trade wars in principle. They merely object to Trump's decision to impose tariffs on Canada. Both agree with the entire Canadian political establishment that Trump should focus on waging economic war on, and preparing for military conflict with, China; and are eager for Ottawa to participate in a Trump-led "Fortress North America," so long as Canadian imperialism's prerogatives as Washington's junior partner are duly recognized.

For governments on both sides of the 49th parallel, the imposition of punishing tariffs on China and its industrial hinterlands in Vietnam and Cambodia are entirely necessary, as are significant increases in military budgets to prepare for future armed confrontation with Beijing.

The price of all these actions will be borne by the working class. In every country, they will see their jobs, living conditions and their very lives attacked as capitalists around the globe seek to further enrich themselves in their predatory struggle for a redivision of the world.

On top of the 4,500 layoffs in Windsor, Flavio Volpe, CEO of the Automotive Parts Manufacturers Association, has said that up to 12,000

more Canadian auto parts workers are now "off the job" due to Stellantis' production pauses. Industry analysts warn that this is only a down payment in what will be a massive cascading, tariff-war driven job losses.

The tariff measures have been launched under Trump's nationalist "Made in America" campaign. However, as autoworkers in every country are fully aware, there is not a single vehicle in Canada, the US or anywhere else that is not the result of a global production process.

As a so-called "worker representative" on Trudeau and now Carney's Prime Minister's Advisory Council on Canada-US relations, Payne has pressed for Ottawa to respond with aggressive counter-measures to every Trump tariff. In the name of defending "Canadian jobs" and "our country," she issued "an economic call to arms" in early March. Like the Canadian Labour Congress, Unifor is playing a leading role in promoting the flag-waving nationalist filth that has characterized the response of all the federal parties in the current election campaign.

Unifor's "Canada First" nationalism and the crisis facing auto workers

"Trump," declared the Unifor president recently, "is about to learn how interconnected the North American production system is the hard way, with auto workers paying the price for that lesson."

What a sham! Payne and Unifor have worked systematically to split workers in Canada from their class brothers and sisters in the US and Mexico. This has allowed the auto bosses to pit workers against each other in a race to the bottom, although the process of interconnected auto production has in fact placed workers in a powerful position, by strengthening their objective unity. One of Payne's first major actions as union president shortly after she succeeded the disgraced former President Jerry Dias, was to sabotage any joint struggle of workers at the Detroit Three's US and Canadian operations, although for the first time in decades their contracts expired virtually at the same time.

Payne championed what was effectively a "Canada First" strategy. Along with the UAW, Unifor sought to drive a wedge between Canadian and American workers, insisting from the outset the Canadian-based union would "chart its own course" in the contract talks. Rather than mobilizing workers in a joint struggle against the auto bosses on both sides of the border, Payne once again pumped out the same nationalist poison that has hamstrung autoworkers for generations.

This "Canadian course" has seen decades of concessions contracts forced down the throats of an ever-declining membership in the auto plants as competing nationalist bureaucrats in the UAW and CAW/Unifor have "whip-sawed" jobs and wages back and forth across the border to the lowest bidder in a never-ending race to the bottom.

Indeed, Unifor itself owes its existence to the 1985 split with the UAW

that set the stage for a bloodbath in the auto sector. Since 1985, Unifor and its predecessor, the Canadian Autoworkers (CAW) have presided over the loss of over 80,000 jobs in the automotive sector with those remaining labouring under a succession of deals that have seen the imposition of divisive multi-tier contracts, the end of defined benefit pension programs, the flooding into the plants of low wage Temporary Part Time workers and the brutal intensification of working conditions.

The divisive strategy in the 2023 contract struggles could not have been expressed more crudely than by the former (Windsor Stellantis) Unifor Local 444 President Dave Cassidy. He asserted, “The fact of the matter is that if it comes down to product, I can play nice in the sandbox right until the facts come that it’s between us and the UAW—then the gloves go off.”

Fain said next to nothing about the Canadian struggle and instead went into action to prevent any movement toward an industry-wide strike. Defying widespread rank-and-file calls for all-out strike action, Fain ordered 95 percent of the membership to remain on the job, only sanctioning token “stand up strikes” at a few sites. The sellout settlement that was eventually rammed through allowed for an Electric Vehicle (EV) driven restructuring of the Detroit Three’s US operation that has already led to the layoff of thousands of autoworkers.

Today, Fain promotes Trump’s “Made in America” policies as the way forward to create a new “Arsenal of Democracy” for future shooting wars. With an eye towards China, he told reporters only last month, “You know, people forget this lesson in World War II. The way that we formed the Arsenal of Democracy that won the war was, they took the excess capacity of all the automotive manufacturing plants in the country, and produced tanks and planes and bombs and engines and all those things.”

Expanding job cuts

The situation for Canadian autoworkers is no less dire. Even before Trump’s tariffs, EV restructuring had seen the layoff of over 3,000 Oakville Ford assemblers. An EV re-tooling operation shutdown the plant in the spring of 2024 with the promise that a new (albeit slimmed down) workforce would be called back in late 2026 or early 2027. However, that plan was recently scuttled, with Ford executives now transferring its projected Oakville EV production to the United States. Workers were outraged. Payne bleated a meek message to Ford’s CEO stating her “disappointment and frustration.” Ford’s new plan is to switch to production of a gas-powered Super Duty pickup in Oakville and re-open in mid-2026 with a workforce of only 1,800.

Payne was similarly “disappointed” with the lengthy shutdown of the Stellantis Brampton assembly plant for an EV refit that began in late 2023, only months after the contract settlement. But feelings of disappointment do not pay the mortgage.

The 3,000 workers at the facility expected about a 2-year layoff as the plant was retooled for the next generation Jeep Compass. But then in February Stellantis announced that due to “today’s dynamic environment,” the retooling work would be “paused” for at least two more months and the remaining 400 skilled trades workers laid off. The company, which was paid hundreds of millions in government subsidies, is contractually obligated to eventually re-open and has floated a possible mid-2026 restart.

Under the terms of the current pattern contract, autoworkers at the Canadian assembly plants of the Detroit Three who are on layoff receive just 70 percent of their normal wages through Supplemental Unemployment Benefits (SUB). The length of payouts is based on seniority, with those workers with 20 years’ experience getting payments

for up to 2 years. Workers with one to three years on the job can expect SUB support for just 9 months. Laid off workers will face extreme uncertainty and financial stress as they wait for their plants to resume operations, forcing them to look for other work and rely on food banks to make ends meet. The thousands of Unifor members working to supply auto parts to the shuttered plants have no such supplemental wage backstops whatsoever.

The current disastrous layoff plan at the GM CAMI plant is only the latest blow to the workers there. During an EV refit in 2022, hundreds of laid off workers eventually were forced to sign up at local food banks. When production eventually re-started, the workforce was slowly called back, first with short-time shift sharing schedules and ultimately building to 1,200 workers—1,600 less than the number employed before the defeated strike of 2017. During that strike, rather than uniting with Mexican workers producing the same Equinox vehicle to jointly fight against GM restructuring, Unifor incited foul anti-Mexican chauvinism and demanded that Mexican workers’ jobs be sacrificed to maintain production at CAMI.

At GM’s Propulsion plant in St. Catharines, the workforce has been cut in half and now sits at 600 workers as the company has delayed a scheduled EV refit until at least 2027. And only this past week, at GM’s Oshawa assembly operation, some 3,000 workers, most of whom have been labouring on the inferior second-tier wage scale, have learned that GM management has announced plans to hire an unspecified number of temporary employees at its Fort Wayne, Indiana, assembly plant in the wake of the US tariff on imported vehicles. Those new hires will build the same Silverado model as that produced in Oshawa, raising fears that GM could later “reshore” Silverado production to the Indiana facility.

As the WSWS has repeatedly explained, autoworkers need a new internationalist strategy developed independently of the corporatist trade union apparatuses and the capitalist parties.

In unison with the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), the WSWS calls for workers to build rank-and-file committees in every workplace, organizationally and politically independent of Unifor. This will enable them to mobilize their class strength and to place at the centre of the development of a struggle against the attack on their jobs and wages the forging of a fighting unity with workers in the US, Mexico and beyond.



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