

# GM's closure of its Ontario CAMI plant exposes the dead end of Unifor's nationalist partnership with corporate Canada

**Carl Bronski****27 October 2025**

GM Canada announced October 21 that it is ending operations at the CAMI Assembly plant in Ingersoll, Ontario, due to seriously slumping sales for its Chevrolet BrightDrop EV 600 and EV 400 cargo delivery vans.

A 2021 EV retooling at the plant to produce the new vans cost \$2 billion, with about \$500 million coming from the governments of Ontario and Canada.

The move by GM will see the loss of more than 1,000 jobs at the assembly operation. Jobs for another 200 workers at GM's wholly-owned Ultium battery operation in Ingersoll remain in limbo. Workers at both facilities suffered sporadic downtime in recent years due to supply problems and low orders and had been on indefinite layoff for months.

The idling of the assembly plant comes 36 years after auto assembly operations began in Ingersoll. GM Canada president Kristian Aquilina said workers would receive full pay for six months along with some benefits.

Federal Industry Minister Melanie Joly told reporters that she had spoken with the local leader of Unifor as well as Ontario Premier Doug Ford and that they had agreed to create a response group to push for new production at the plant. For her part, Lana Payne, president of Unifor, Canada's largest private-sector union, joined with Ontario Premier Doug Ford to pressure Prime Minister Mark Carney and his Liberal government on the basis of a bogus cross-class appeal to common national interests between bosses and workers. "Canada must respond with a real industrial strategy that defends Canadian jobs, leverages our market, and pushes back on Trump's economic bullying," said Payne.

The company has stated that BrightDrop production will not be moved elsewhere, but management will now consult with the Canadian government regarding the plant's future. GM cited decreased market demand and high inventory levels for the electric vehicle as the reason for the shutdown, although the decision, like the one earlier this month by Stellantis to mothball its assembly plant in Brampton and an earlier cut of the third shift at GM Oshawa, is closely tied to moves by the Detroit Three auto companies to go all-in on US President Trump's tariff and reshoring strategy.

Paul, a worker at the plant whose tenure was defined by years of on-and-off production, explained to the *World Socialist Web Site*, "I fear our sector has been sacrificed in order to prolong the life of CUSMA (the Canada-US-Mexico trade agreement), a document Trump has already reneged on in imposing tariffs. CAMI was doomed the minute the US backed out of the Paris Climate agreement. It's devastating news but it was death by 1,000 scratches. The Big Three should be held accountable for their spineless treatment of Ontario workers."

The basis for the shutdown was laid by a deal ratified by 91 percent of the CAMI workforce in 2021. Unifor pushed it through after the union

bureaucracy suddenly re-opened the contract with the GM subsidiary almost a year early and with no consultation with the rank and file.

With the internal combustion Equinox crossover vehicle slated to be soon 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 significant changes to work rules and job classifications, jobs would likely be lost, and there would be no guarantees of final employment or production numbers when workers were recalled after a shutdown for a retooling of unknown duration.

A new "Competitive Operating Agreement" with all the details, they added, was not ready to be presented to the membership. It would have to be accepted unseen and apparently with key details yet to be hammered out.

Three years later, CAMI workers still struggled 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, many workers 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 the spring of 2024. But even after that workers continued to rotate between two weeks of work and four weeks of layoff until last July, when virtually the entire plant workforce was placed on temporary layoff.

To induce GM to keep the plant open, Unifor, which is in a corporatist partnership with the auto bosses and the federal and Ontario governments, worked with the automaker to press veteran "legacy" workers to accept

incentives to retire. 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.

In 2017, the union bureaucrats led by now disgraced former president Jerry Dias sabotaged a month-long strike by inciting Canadian nationalism that divided CAMI workers from their class brothers and sisters producing the Equinox in Mexican plants. This betrayal paved the way for production and job cuts that soon reduced the workforce to 1900, even as the low-wage two-tier workforce swelled.

Such were the hardships imposed on the remaining workforce during the plant's retooling and the subsequent launch of EV production, autoworkers, family members and other supporters created a charity grocery program, called Camily Funds for Food. The crisis facing many CAMI autoworkers and their families had so significantly deepened that visits to the various other foodbanks in the area sky rocketed.

Paul noted, "As CAMI was my first exposure to union politics it wasn't until the strike of 2017 that I felt the ugly nationalistic impulses just underneath the surface. Jerry Dias came to do a 'rah-rah' speech on our makeshift rally stage. He blamed Mexicans for stealing our jobs—not the true reason the Equinox was leaving our plant. It was GM's corporate mandate to chase profit over anything else."

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 contract negotiations.

Sporadic layoffs at Stellantis' Windsor Assembly soon plagued the workforce as the company began to establish separate lines for EV, hybrid and internal combustion engine vehicle production. By January 2025 the plant was scaled back to a rotating schedule of one- and two-shift weeks. According to the company's latest promises, only in January 2026 will it re-start full round-the-clock production with 4,000 workers.

In the United States, United Auto Workers (UAW) leader Shawn Fain, a close ally first of the Biden administration and now a full-throated backer of Trump and his tariff policies, also forced through equally ruthless attacks on American workers in the 2023 negotiations while spouting militant rhetoric that was quickly exposed as thousands of workers were cashiered.

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 in early 2024. The first shift was not projected to return to work until the end of 2025, and the third shift only to resume in the latter half of 2026. Now, as a result of Stellantis' decision to shift production of the "promised" Jeep Compass model to production lines in Belvedere, Illinois, all 3,200 workers will be indefinitely laid off.

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.

At GM's other operations, job losses continue to mount. Only a few weeks ago at GM's Oshawa assembly operation, some 3,000 workers, most of whom have been labouring on the inferior second-tier wage scale, learned that the third shift will be ended in January resulting in the loss of 750 jobs (and about 2,000 auto parts supplier jobs) as a result of the automaker's decision to move a portion of the production of the Chevrolet Silverado to its Fort Wayne, Indiana plant. 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.

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 "Team Canada" poison that has hamstrung autoworkers for generations, by 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 nearly 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 consequences of this nationalist outlook have been devastating on both sides of the border. Tens of thousands of jobs have been lost, and wages and conditions have been driven down in the name of "competitiveness." Yet the Unifor and UAW bureaucrats remain committed to the same course, clinging to their alliances with "their" ruling classes to maintain their privileged positions as junior partners in corporate management.

At CAMI, the results are now plain. A plant once hailed as a model of "Canadian productivity" has been reduced to silence. But the anger and determination among workers are far from extinguished. "As a junior member of a union, a Canadian and a dad, I know one thing," CAMI worker Paul said. "It's better to get the short end of the stick than to be beaten to death with the long end. Complacency and embracing the status quo is unacceptable. Action must be taken without resorting to xenophobic nationalist hogwash."

That sentiment points to the real way forward. To fight the layoffs, wage cuts, and restructuring now unfolding across the auto industry, workers cannot rely on Unifor, the Canadian Labour Congress, or any section of the existing trade-union apparatus. These organizations defend the interests of the corporations and the state, not those of workers. The first step is to establish rank-and-file committees—democratically controlled organizations of workers themselves—Independent of the union bureaucracy. Such committees can unite autoworkers in Canada, the United States, and Mexico in a common struggle to defend jobs and living standards against the dictates of transnational capital and the reactionary nationalism of their own ruling classes.

The closure of CAMI is a serious blow, but it is not the end of the story. The lessons drawn from this experience must serve as the foundation for a new, international movement of workers determined to assert their own independent interests and to organize production on the basis of social need rather than corporate profit.



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