

“It looks like there’s a market for it”:

Canada’s Unifor union urges conversion of auto plant to war production

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Unifor Local 88 Plant Chair Mike Van Boekel revealed last month that discussions have been held with General Motors management on producing military vehicles at the currently idled CAMI auto assembly plant in Ingersoll, Ontario. The discussions are “pretty secretive,” he said. “It looks like there’s a market for it—we just need a green light from the government to go ahead and do it,” he enthused.

Officials at GM and in the federal Liberal and Ontario Progressive Conservative governments have thus far remained non-committal about converting the CAMI plant to military production, and have not been forthcoming with details.

The federal Ministry of Industry—which formed a working group with GM, the union and the right-wing Progressive Conservative provincial government after GM shuttered the CAMI plant last October—has declared the expansion of Canada’s armaments industry a governmental priority.

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.

Unifor has led the entire union bureaucracy in championing reactionary “Team Canada” nationalism in response to US President Donald Trump’s threats to annex Canada as the 51st US state and destroy its industrial base as part of his “America First” agenda. In so doing, Unifor has urged workers to line up behind the former central banker and blue-chip executive Carney, who in the name of opposing Trump has spearheaded a dramatic shift right.

Carney’s Liberal government is imposing sweeping public spending austerity and mass lay-offs to pay for an explosion in Canada’s military budget and handouts to the financial oligarchy. Unifor endorses this agenda, as shown by a series of policy papers released over several years advocating the creation of a “national industrial strategy” based on the strengthening of aerospace and “defence” manufacturing, i.e.,

domestic production of military equipment for war.

GM spokesperson Ariane Pereira told reporters the company is considering several options for the plant, but avoided any mention of possible production of a military vehicle. Outside industry analysts and military officials have largely withheld comment.

Last October, company management suspended all production at the CAMI plant indefinitely. It cited decreased market demand and high inventory levels for its BrightDrop electric delivery van as the reason for the shutdown. About 1,000 assembly workers lost their jobs.

After production of the Equinox internal combustion vehicle ended in 2021, workers at the plant had been forced to struggle through a lengthy layoff for e-vehicle retooling. This was followed, in the ensuing years, by sporadic periods of downtime and continuing layoffs.

The closure decision came alongside Stellantis’ move to indefinitely mothball its assembly plant in Brampton, Ford’s continuing idling of production at its Oakville facility and last week’s elimination of the third shift at GM Oshawa. It is closely tied to moves by the Detroit Three auto companies to go all in on US President Trump’s strategy of using tariffs and other economic sanctions to “reshore” manufacturing capacity to the US.

The Carney government has placed rearmament at the centre of its economic strategy, channeling vast public funds into weapons procurement and building a domestic military-industrial base. Ottawa’s budget and policy documents commit hundreds of billions to expanding armaments production over the next decade and a new “Defence Industrial Strategy” that treats every firm as a potential “defence” supplier. This agenda aims to equip Canadian imperialism to wage war around the world as a new redivision of the globe between the great powers escalates.

Carney’s new 5 percent of GDP defence spending target will cost the federal government more than \$150 billion a year when fully implemented in 2035. Carney has already committed an additional \$9.3 billion to this year’s defence budget alone, bringing the total to \$62 billion. The government still needs to

add an additional \$50 billion per year for the Defence Department to meet the 3.5 per cent of GDP direct military spending goal in future years.

The additional monies to stoke the Canadian war machine will come from the blood and sweat of the working class in the form of more cuts to public services, public sector jobs, Medicare and other social supports and the overall living standards of workers from coast to coast. And in expectation of working-class resistance to this class-war agenda, the Carney government, with the support of all the parliamentary parties, has already embarked on an assault on the basic democratic rights of the population. Major strikes are quickly outlawed on the orders of the government as a matter of course. Rights to assemble and protest are being squeezed. Critics of government policies find themselves cancelled, vilified, charged with offences and even jailed.

Displaying its close affinity with the course charted by the Liberal government and Canadian big business, Unifor union officials are actively promoting Carney's rearmentament plans. On January 9, three days after Van Boekel's statement on the conversion of the CAMI plant to war production, Lana Payne wrote Industry Minister Melanie Joly: "We are closely monitoring developments on procurement of fighter aircraft and government's efforts to align investment in the sector with a broader industrial strategy. Given our vested interest in the outcome of your ministry's decisions, we are requesting a meeting to discuss priorities for the sector."

Military vehicle production is already growing at Canadian industrial facilities. Roshel's Senator-style armoured combat vehicle, built in Brampton, Ontario, has been supplied in the hundreds to the Ukrainian military since the beginning of the US/NATO-instigated war with Russia. Just last November, ICE placed an expedited order with Roshel for a fleet of 20 of these armoured vehicles to support its fascist-style raids on immigrant communities across the US. Photographs have already shown them appearing on the streets of Minneapolis, where ICE agents shot and killed two people last month.

In London, Ontario General Dynamics has for decades produced light-armoured vehicles for the Canadian Armed Forces. Over the past decade, the company has fulfilled a lucrative contract with the despotic Saudi Arabian regime to provide 742 vehicles worth \$15 billion. So controversial was this project that Unifor officials, who organized workers in the plant, tried to keep the contract with the Saudis "under wraps" until, much to Unifor's embarrassment, then NDP leader Tom Mulcair wielded the information to attack Prime Minister Stephen Harper during a 2015 federal election debate.

Unifor's campaign for the Carney government to promote switching auto plants to military production enjoys the backing of important sections of the ruling class. Former Ontario Liberal Finance Minister Greg Sorbara, along with James Arnett, former chief executive of Molson Inc. and former chair of the giant electricity concern Hydro One, and James Hinds,

former managing director of TD Securities and former chair of the Independent Electricity System Operator board, rallied together in a recent *Globe and Mail* Op-Ed to boost the idea.

With the Detroit Three auto footprint in Canada ever-dwindling, they wrote: "We suggest Canada should be prepared, if the USMCA [US-Mexico-Canada Agreement] negotiations are unsuccessful—or maybe even if they are successful—to repurpose the auto industry and its employees for other sectors. There is a precedent at hand. During the Second World War, under the leadership of federal minister of munitions and supply C.D. Howe, the auto industry was converted into the defence industry."

The influential Chief Executive of the Automotive Parts Manufacturers Association (APMA), Flavio Volpe, has also jumped on board, telling reporters that the future of a made-in-Canada auto industry may lie in growing defence sector spending. Last November's budget pledged about \$80 billion over five years in increased military spending, and some of that money, Volpe argues, could be used to develop and build a dual-purpose "made in Canada" vehicle. The military vehicle would serve Canada's military and be marketed to NATO allies, while the civilian version would be sold to Canadian consumers and exported globally. "Every advanced economy in the world has a manufacturing sector...The APMA is also studying the possibility of a Canadian-made car and will have a report later this year on the viability of a vehicle," Volpe said.

Nationalism and pro-imperialist militarism offer no basis upon which workers can defend good-paying, secure jobs under conditions of an ever deepening capitalist crisis. The task facing workers in Canada threatened with layoffs due to the trade war with the US and the accelerating shift from civilian to war production is to unify their struggles with workers in the United States, who are engaging in ever broader struggles against Trump. "America First" protectionism and "Team Canada" nationalism express the interests of competing imperialist powers, both determined to offload the costs of their conflicts onto the working class. Workers across North America must advance their independent class interests by adopting a socialist-internationalist programme and fighting together for the establishment of workers governments that put social needs before private profit by transforming the banks and key industries into public utilities under workers' control.



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