

Dakkota workers denounce Detroit plant closure: “They don’t care about us”

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Are you a Dakkota worker? Fill out the form at the end of this article for information on joining a rank-and-file committee to fight the plant closure and defend all workers’ jobs.

Dakkota Integrated Systems has announced that it will close its Detroit plant and eliminate 397 jobs. The closure, disclosed in a WARN notice filed October 19 with the state of Michigan, is scheduled to proceed in two stages: one line shuts down December 31, eliminating 205 jobs, and the second goes down March 31, 2027, with 192 additional layoffs.

The plant, which opened only five years ago, was hailed by Detroit officials, the United Auto Workers and the corporate media as a showcase of the “spinoff benefits” of the Mack Assembly Plant. Stellantis opened in 2019, the first new assembly plant in the city in three decades.

Dakkota CEO Aaron Rivers told *Automotive News* that the company was outbid for the instrument panel work on the Jeep Grand Cherokee and Dodge Durango. “We wanted to keep this work, but our goal now is to just get through this activity,” he said. But workers do not accept this account.

In interviews with the *World Socialist Web Site*, workers rejected the company’s official explanation and said Dakkota owner Andra Rush wanted to replace the current workforce with cheaper non-union labor. They also denounced the United Auto Workers bureaucracy for keeping them in the dark and doing nothing to defend their jobs.

A worker who has been at the plant since it opened described the poverty wages that have prevailed from the start. “When we first opened, we started off at \$15.50. They called us the sweatshop, because everybody got paid way more than we do,” she said. “So when we got the union, we raised the wages, and we just signed a contract in March.”

Under the new contract, the starting wage rose to \$19.50, with some long-serving workers reaching \$23 or \$24 an hour depending on department, she said. “But it’s still not enough. We’re slaving all these hours and then they want to cut you. They overwork you for the lowest of the low. They don’t value what people are in here.”

The workers produce instrument panels—the dashboard, radio, instrument cluster, HVAC controls, and wiring harnesses—for SUVs that sell for \$40,000 to \$70,000 dollars. A Stellantis worker at the Mack Assembly Plant told the *World Socialist Web Site*, “the previous Stellantis boss, Carlos Tavares, was famous for sticking a gun at the head of all the suppliers to cut costs. He’s gone and he got millions, but Stellantis is still squeezing the suppliers. Now they are cutting 400 jobs in Detroit and another 70 workers in Lansing. These workers are busting their asses for half of what we make and now they’re losing their jobs. That’s disgusting.”

Dakkota workers see the closure as a deliberate effort by owner Andra Rush to abrogate the current labor agreement and employ even lower paid workers. Rush, they note, has already set up a non-union company, Emotiv Mobility, ostensibly to diversify into aerospace and “next-generation mobility.” “So, she set up another company, which they say is not coming in here, but we already know that it is. And people that work here, they may have to reapply for their jobs and start at the lowest of the low. That’s not fair.”

Management, another Dakkota worker said, is already working with Michigan Works, the state workforce agency, to recruit impoverished workers to staff whatever operations remain.

“She knew how to work the system”

The workers also dispute the company’s version of how the Stellantis contract was lost. “I know, from what I read, that she backed out of a contract that she had with Stellantis. That wasn’t fulfilled. So when she did that, Stellantis got mad. And Stellantis wanted to sue her. But she knew how to work the system,” the worker said. “Some of these companies know how to work the system. They work their contract out, and then they drop it. That’s not fair to everybody else. You know, you messed up people’s livelihood.”

A second worker pointed to the timing of the closure, which came on the heels of a newly ratified contract. “I also have an inkling that it might have something to do with the contract that we ushered in,” he said. “Although even though we won a contract, I think it was in April when it was ratified, we still did not get our back pay because the company purposely dragged the negotiations out. They knew they had a weak union that was compliant. In fact, they probably were working in cahoots with our union, that is Local 155, with the good people at corporate Dakkota, to give us a sellout deal.”

He continued: “Now we’re being told at this late date, in October, that they’re going to relocate this location here, Detroit Kettering, to Canada because Stellantis did not renew their contract. I think that’s baloney, because they could scurry up other contracts. Maybe because they’re looking at cheaper labor. They don’t want to pay workers up to \$25.75 an hour, which would be at the end of this contract.”

The plant was built on the site of the closed Kettering High School, with the help of a \$1.5 million state grant and a \$3.5 million tax abatement. “They got huge tax breaks to open this place up,” the first worker said. “They build a damn place right on a closed school. All the money that’s being sucked out of the public services to give tax

cuts to the rich. And now, the poor, the low income, the working class are the ones that are paying for it.”

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Dakkota owner Andra Rush is a descendant of the Mohawk tribe and founder and CEO of the Rush Group, one of the largest Native American-owned companies in the country. In 2014, she was the guest of Michelle Obama during the State of the Union address, where President Obama praised her as a symbol of the success of minority-owned businesses. The Democratic president, who imposed a 50 percent wage cut for new hires during the 2009 auto industry restructuring, praised Rush for opening up Detroit Manufacturing Systems and recruiting impoverished city residents to build components for Ford’s top-selling F-150 pickup trucks.

In 2018, Rush sold off her stake in Detroit Manufacturing Systems, walking away with millions. Today, workers at the renamed Voltava plant make \$18 an hour, and many are hired through temp agencies even as they are compelled to pay dues to UAW Local 600. In 2024, Dakkota workers in Chicago rejected three UAW-backed contracts and waged a month-long strike that the union bureaucracy shut down because it was disrupting production at the Ford Chicago Assembly Plant.

The celebration of “minority-owned” and “women-owned” suppliers is a means by which the ruling class and its political representatives, Democrat and Republican alike, dress up the brutal exploitation of the working class in the costume of racial and gender progress. The workers at Dakkota, whatever the identity of the person who owns the company, are paid poverty wages and are now being thrown onto the street.

The silence of the UAW

The 397 workers at the Detroit plant are ostensibly represented by UAW Local 155. This reporter contacted the local for a statement on the job cuts but has received no response. Nothing has been posted on the local’s Facebook page about the closure. Local 155’s president also could not be reached for comment by *Automotive News*.

The silence extends to the very top of the union. The UAW’s national headquarters, Solidarity House, sits less than three miles directly south on Van Dyke Street from the Dakkota plant. Yet UAW President Shawn Fain and the union’s leadership have not issued a single statement on the threatened closure of the plant, let alone declared that they would fight it. Indeed, plants are closed and entire shifts eliminated in Detroit and around the country without so much as a public protest from the bureaucracy.

The workers are blunt about the union’s role. “We haven’t heard anything from the Local 155 about relocating anywhere, because we haven’t seen or heard of them in any capacity as of yet, to my knowledge,” the second worker said. “And it just makes me look at the union now as very suspect. You know, we’ve got a bunch of lazy, wannabe poodle cats, you understand, who just aren’t happy with their cozy positions out in Warren. And they don’t have to deal with any of the nuances that are afflicting workers here at this plant.”

The first worker pointed to the absence of Fain from the shop floor. “Shawn Fain, it was the first time I heard of him, when they said he was running for UAW president. And he still won, and he’s the one taking and closing everything down,” she said.

She spoke about the recent UAW national officers election where just 9 percent of the membership voted, with just 273 votes cast at Local 155 in Warren, Michigan, out of more than 5,600 members, under 5 percent. “Who did you see come here and represent and tell people what they’re voting for? Some of these people are not voting because they don’t understand what they’re voting for. They don’t even know these people.”

The second worker described the broader assault that has followed the UAW’s much-celebrated 2023 contracts. “Once they got this new great contract, the immediate thing that Stellantis started doing, ... they immediately let go, or let’s just say summarily fired, thousands of supplemental workers that they were supposed to have been obligated to roll over into full-time employment under the Shawn Fain contract,” he said. “Then they cut off the third shifts for all of their plants ... just this past year they were denied profit-sharing checks.”

The workers expressed support for the fight to build rank-and-file committees independent of the UAW apparatus, and for the international unity of autoworkers. Asked about the campaign of Will Lehman, the Mack Trucks worker who ran for UAW president on a program of abolishing the union bureaucracy and transferring power to the shop floor, the second worker responded: “Yeah, we have the power to do that. You know, I mean, the power is to the people. It always is to the people.”

He pointed to the cross-border struggle against Stellantis, whose Canadian workers voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike against layoffs and the threatened selloff of the Brampton, Ontario, plant. “Oppression against one group of people, laborers especially, anywhere in the world is oppression against all workers everywhere,” he said. “You have to cut the beast off at the head and stop the bleeding before it even spreads. So it would be incumbent upon us to join in and fight with our brothers across the border in Mexico, our brothers in Canada, because we would be next if we don’t.”

Pointing to the wave of protests spreading across France, Italy, Spain and other countries, he said, “Good for them. Absolutely. I mean, let’s bring it back to the good old medieval days when the peasants stormed the palace gates with pitchforks and torches, grabbed the king and the queen and threw out their collective royal asses. Yeah, let’s go on back to that.”

The closure of the Dakkota plant is part of a global assault on auto jobs, carried out by Stellantis and the other transnational automakers with the collaboration of the UAW and its counterparts abroad. The answer is not to beg the company or the union for mercy, but to fight for the independent, international mobilization of the working class, through rank-and-file committees controlled by workers themselves, to defend every job, reopen every closed plant and transform the auto industry from a source of private profit into a public service organized to meet social need.



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