Stellantis to sell Brampton Assembly Plant to producer of military vehicles, destroying 2,200 auto jobs in Canada

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Stellantis Canada announced last week that it has finalized an agreement to sell its Brampton Assembly Plant (BAP), idled since December 2023, to the Canada-based "combat proven" military vehicle manufacturer Roshel Inc. More than 2,200 autoworkers, already laid off for 3 years, will lose their livelihoods along with an estimated 10,000 supply chain and other support workers.

The announcement is a blow to the federal Liberal government and corporate Canada. The country's auto industry has experienced a drastic decline over recent years, accelerated by the eruption of trade war with the United States, which has restricted access to the industry's most important market.

The sale also represents a devastating indictment of the bankrupt policies of Unifor, Canada's largest private-sector union. It has systematically blocked autoworkers from taking up a struggle against the planned selloff and Stellantis' push to enforce concessions at its Windsor Assembly Plant, where over 6,000 workers are employed, and a smaller facility in Etobicoke.

Contracts were due for renewal for approximately 17,000 autoworkers at the Detroit Three's Canadian operations this year. Unifor bent over backwards to facilitate corporate cost-cutting and profitability, including by ramming through pro-company agreements at Ford and GM well before the September expirations that included a retention of the hated multi-tier wage system and real-terms pay cuts. Unifor was already aware of reports about the potential selloff of BAP prior to the September 21 contract expiration and clearly wanted to avoid a situation where workers from all three companies could have launched a joint struggle in defence of jobs.

However, Unifor has refused to call a strike eight weeks after the contract expired, even though a massive 97.3 percent vote in favour of a walkout was registered a month ago. Unifor President Lana Payne made clear at a press conference last Thursday that workers should expect no fight from the union bureaucracy, which is now committed to returning to the "bargaining table" to finalize a new contract that does not include the resumption of production at BAP. "We're going to keep going, and we're going to keep pushing," she asserted. Unifor has not even declared a deadlock at the bargaining table by filing with the Ontario labour board a "no board" report that would legally allow for a strike to begin 17 days after the filing.

Unifor's suppression of worker opposition to Stellantis' selloff of BAP and demands for attacks on the remaining workforce flows from its reactionary Canadian nationalist, pro-capitalist politics. Unifor is a wholehearted supporter of the Carney government's "Team Canada" trade war agenda, which calls on workers to make "sacrifices" to protect the interests of corporate Canada. In this, Unifor is continuing the nationalist, anti-worker agenda it and its predecessor, the Canadian Auto Workers, has pursued for over four decades since it split from the United Autoworkers in 1985.

Mirroring the American nationalism of the UAW, which has culminated in UAW President Shawn Fain endorsing fascist president Donald Trump's "America first" tariffs, the CAW/Unifor have implemented one round of concessions after another and overseen the destruction of thousands of auto jobs. Both union bureaucracies have whipsawed jobs and conditions back and forth across the border as they competed to offer the cheapest labour for the global automakers.

Unifor's anger over the sale of BAP has much more in common with the dissatisfaction expressed by the Canadian ruling class over the move than it does with any concern for the fate of the workers affected.

On Tuesday, Liberal prime minister Mark Carney indignantly proclaimed that the deal was "unacceptable" and "a betrayal" of the thousands of laid off autoworkers at BAP and to "all Canadians." Industry Minister Melanie Joly repeated threats to take legal action against Stellantis for violating previous production guarantees while accepting hundreds of millions in federal government funding. Meanwhile, federal Conservative Party opposition leader Pierre Poilievre denounced Joly for her incompetence and called for her resignation.

Roshel CEO Roman Shimonov, for his part, gushed that his purchase of the Stellantis auto plant was "the best thing that could happen" for Brampton. Then, in a Tuesday evening interview with CTV News, he elaborated further, stating that he had no doubt that the sale would go through. "We prepared the plan. We shared it with the government," he said. "We have a very specific plan that is not only about defence, the plan is talking about attracting other automakers from other countries."

Shimonov spent 15 years in the officer corps of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) before moving into the security industry. The company he founded in 2016 builds its Senator armoured car in Brampton with chassis shipped from Ford operations in the United States, and has supplied nearly 3,000 such vehicles to the Ukrainian armed forces as part of the Liberal government's military aid to the Zelensky regime in the NATO-fueled war against Russia.

Roshel has also supplied vehicles to the US ICE anti-immigrant force, and photographs have shown them on the streets of Minneapolis, where ICE agents shot and killed two people in January. The purchaser of the Brampton plant, in other words, is a pillar of the very militarism and police repression that the Carney government is stoking at home and abroad.

In less than 24 hours, "highly placed sources" familiar with "confidential" discussions held in the past several months involving the Prime Minister's Office, Joly's ministry, Stellantis and Roshel told reporters that government officials were "actively and intensely involved" and had signalled that the government would not stand in the way of the

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proposed sale.

Joly's office stepped in to provide some damage control. Spokesman Mathis Denis said that they could not comment on discussions that happened "under the seal of confidentiality." "The government heard many proposals," said Denis. "The government of Canada never advocated for a deal between Roshel and Stellantis," he added, without mentioning that neither did it seek to block any such arrangement. "We remain unsatisfied with the plans we have seen but will not discuss what was exchanged in confidence," concluded Denis.

Travelling overseas, a prickly Carney on Thursday told reporters, "Being informed or being aware of some aspects is not the same as Stellantis providing a global solution for those workers at the plant, which is their obligation."

On Tuesday, Ontario premier Ford wrote to Carney to affirm that Roshel would not be allowed to assemble "Chinese-made knock-down kits" — where a Chinese auto manufacturer imports whole sections of an automobile simply to be put together in Canada by a small, unskilled assembly workforce. Roshel had already stated that it would seek to set aside a portion of floor space for possible future low-wage vehicle assembly.

Fuelling anti-China hysteria, which the ruling class has embraced as part of its backing for US-led economic and military preparations for war with Beijing, Ford continued, "The economic impact of introducing kits to Ontario's automotive sector would be devastating to Canadian automotive workers and to the thousands of businesses and workers across the Canadian automotive and auto parts supply chain".

The Roshel purchase in Brampton has a certain upside for Carney and his provincial ally Ford. Roshel's capacity to produce armoured vehicles will be greatly increased. With a lower wage workforce unencumbered by expensive benefits and pension responsibilities, the profitability of the global arms manufacturer can only expand and branch out into other armament programs. Already, General Motors (GM), with government approval and Unifor support, is seeking to win armaments procurement contracts at its long-idled CAMI plant in Ingersoll, Ontario.

The Carney government has placed rearmament and its own protectionist policies at the centre of its economic strategy, channeling vast public funds into weapons procurement and building a domestic military-industrial base. The Liberal government is committed to spending 5 percent of GDP on war and related infrastructure by 2035 so as to ensure Ottawa is one of the aggressive players in the rapidly escalating violent redivision of the world among the major powers.

Carney has built a nationalist "Team Canada" alliance to enforce this agenda, encompassing the mainstream political parties, provincial premiers, Canadian Labour Congress and Unifor, and a flag-waving establishment press.

To fund rearmament and the enrichment of the wealthy, the big business Liberal government has moved to deepen attacks on working-class living standards by further slashing public services, suppressing wages, neutering the right to strike, weakening environmental and safety regulations and privatizing key infrastructure.

Stellantis has insisted a 2022-23 agreement for government funding in exchange for production guarantees—an agreement that Unifor championed—was not violated. That deal saw the federal government promise $529 million for Stellantis to retool and update its facilities at Brampton and Windsor. The Ontario Conservative government also promised over $500 million but had held back all of the funding earmarked for Brampton as troubles with Stellantis began to surface.

However, some $222 million had already been handed over to Stellantis by the federal government before the company announced that the Jeep Compass would be produced in the US in 2025. Stellantis pointed to a clause in the grant deal that its promise to continue production in Brampton until at least 2035 could be nullified should circumstances beyond their "reasonable control" make the operation "commercially unviable." The trade war was cited as the "circumstance" that forced them to move the promised Jeep production to a previously idled plant in Belvedere, Illinois.

Addressing the issue of recovering the monies taken by Stellantis, a November 12 letter sent by Joly to the company once again raised the threat to launch legal proceedings. She gave the company 30 days to repay "all or part" of the funds dispensed to Stellantis.

At a press conference that same day which took place after a meeting involving herself, Payne, Premier Ford and Stellantis management, Joly could not identify any sanction that would negate the sale of the Brampton plant to Roshel. The best she could offer was that the federal government would seek to arrange a meeting with the global CEO of Stellantis to hammer out an agreement on the outstanding monies.

The struggle of Stellantis workers requires that any strike be motivated by an understanding that the fight over job security must be part of an industrial and political counteroffensive against the global restructuring of the auto industry and the ruling class's agenda of austerity and war.

Canadian autoworkers can only fight the threat of job losses and attacks on their conditions in the closest alliance with their colleagues in the US, Mexico and internationally, who confront the same enemies in the form of globally mobile automakers competing in a ruthless race to the bottom in wages and conditions. Likewise, the transformation of vast swathes of industry from civilian to military production expressed by the BAP selloff is a global development facilitated by the union bureaucracies in every country, as thousands of laid-off workers across Europe and the US can testify.

Twelve hundred workers at National Steel Car in Hamilton are in their third month of strike action. A rank-and-file committee has been built in the plant against nationalism and for an independent strategy to fight against piece work. The committee is also fighting to unite with some 500 steelworkers at Stelco who face layoff.

Volkswagen workers in Germany have formed an independent rank-and-file committee to fight mass layoffs and conversion to military production .

The task before Stellantis workers is to build rank-and-file committees at every plant to enforce their strike mandate and place the conduct of the struggle in their own hands, independent of the pro-corporate, nationalist Unifor apparatus. Through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-file Committees, they must fight to place the global automakers under democratic workers' control and to stop the squandering of society's resources on militarism and war.



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