

“They have no concern for workers. You are just a number”

US autoworkers express anger, opposition at GM layoffs

By a WSWs reporting team
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Autoworkers are reacting with bitterness, anger and defiance in the face of the announcement by General Motors that it is cutting one shift and 1,192 jobs at the company's Detroit-Hamtramck Assembly plant. The facility builds the GM Volt, Cadillac CT6, Chevrolet Impala and Buick LaCrosse passenger car models.

The layoffs at the Detroit-Hamtramck plant are in addition to temporary and permanent layoffs announced by GM in recent weeks affecting 10,000 workers in Ohio, Michigan, Kansas and Kentucky. In addition to Detroit, shifts are being eliminated at the Lordstown Assembly Plant in Ohio and the Lansing Grand River Assembly in Michigan, cutting 2,000 jobs. The layoffs also include 80 contract workers at GM Manufacturing Subsystems.

In recent weeks both Fiat Chrysler and Ford have also announced job cuts, including temporary layoffs at plants building the Ford F-150 pickup truck and workers at the Fiat Chrysler Sterling Heights Assembly plant, which has been temporarily idled due to the company's decision to stop building passenger cars in the US in order to focus on more profitable trucks and SUVs. On Monday, FCA said it would halt output for New Year's week at two factories in Brampton and Windsor, making Chrysler 300, Dodge Charger and Challenger sedans and Chrysler Pacifica minivans.

Autoworkers at the Detroit-Hamtramck plant who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* expressed opposition to the job cuts and disgust with the United Auto Workers union, which has not even made a pretense of opposition. During the shift change Thursday, supporters distributed copies of the newsletter, which contained a statement calling on workers to form rank-and-file committees to fight the layoffs and defend the right to a job.

Tony, a temporary worker who faces the loss of his job, said, “Right before the announcement GM reported record-breaking sales. Then they said, ‘Thank you for your

help and for working hard...we are eliminating second shift.’”

Many of the workers who are being laid off were originally hired in April of 2016 and will have less than one year of seniority in the plant when the job cuts take effect March 5.

Tony continued, “When we hired in the UAW told us it was a long-term assignment. They lied to us in order to get more work out of us. What GM did is cannibalistic and sociopathic. They have no concern for workers. You are just a number. They treat robots better.”

For its part, the UAW has insisted that the auto companies have the right to cut jobs at will in order to maintain their profit levels. A statement issued by UAW Local 22 at the GM Detroit-Hamtramck plant adopted the language of management, saying the company based its decision on “cost-efficiency.”

Indeed the 2015 UAW-GM contract paved the way for the current layoffs by permitting the auto companies to double the number of temporary workers they can hire, effectively creating a third tier of super-exploited workers who can be disposed of at will at no cost to management. This was designed to allow auto companies to quickly downsize and slash costs at the sign of the slightest downturn in sales.

The UAW is a major shareholder of GM stock and its former vice president, Joseph Ashton, sits on the GM board of directors. This gives the UAW a direct financial incentive to slash the jobs, wages, health benefits and pensions of the workers it falsely claims to “represent.”

One second-shift worker said, “For the last six months they have worked us like slaves to build up their inventory. The mood in the plant is terrible. Thirty people walked out and quit in one day. Management doesn't want to let anyone take sick time, because they are afraid you will not come back.”

The layoffs will have a devastating impact on workers, who are not only losing income, but also crucial benefits

such as health care. The fact that most workers affected by the layoffs have less than one year of seniority, means they are not eligible for Supplemental Unemployment Benefits and are only eligible for 20 weeks of state benefits.

A second-shift worker, Jessica, said, “I drive here from Toledo, Ohio every day. People quit full-time jobs, where they had worked for years and had benefits, to come here because GM and the UAW promised us permanent jobs. But you have to have two years before they bring you in and they are laying us off before one year. It’s a slap in the face.

“They are not calling it a layoff but a ‘suspension’ but it is the same thing. In March we are going to lose our health insurance. It’s like we’re working for nothing now.

“During the meeting they said, ‘We’re losing our jobs because the cars aren’t selling.’ Some people used their GM discount to buy a car—and they are getting kicked out. Inside the plant the UAW is telling people, ‘This is what you get for voting for Trump.’ But it would have happened with Clinton too.

“It’s wrong. My dad worked 30 years for Chrysler. He saw lots of layoffs. But it is worse now because of the contracts. It’s like we were hired to get the contract passed. If you don’t have two years you get no profit sharing, no bonuses. They said ‘in-progression’ worker would reach top pay after seven years. But if you are a temp and get laid off you start from the bottom again.

“They don’t care about the workers, about our families and the rising cost of food. They told us to register with the state to get unemployment benefits, but that won’t be more than \$300 a week. What can you buy with that?”

Adam, another Detroit-Hamtramck worker who is facing layoff, said, “I am losing my health benefits. My wife has a blood clot in her lungs and has to take this crazy expensive blood thinner.

“These layoffs were deliberately calculated to take place right before everybody got their seniority. We had been asking the UAW questions for months, but every time they assured us that nothing was going on. They definitely knew this was coming. They are in bed with management.”

Bob , said, “I worked for US Steel in Ecorse, Michigan for 21 years but when I heard they were hiring I came here to get a more permanent job. I had tried to get into the auto industry in the 1990s. Now they are laying me off.

“I was hired on April 4 and they are going to lay us off on March 4. That way we don’t get the year we need to qualify for SUB pay (Supplement Unemployment Benefits).”

The job cuts are being carried out despite booming profits for the US automakers. This includes a \$2.8 billion-dollar profit in the third quarter of 2016 by GM alone. The production cuts point to a slowdown in auto sales, which are winding down after increasing for several years. They

presage new, ferocious attacks by the automakers on jobs and living standards.

Bob continued, “No matter where you are they don’t care about the worker. Management does what it wants so they can make millions. When I hired in they said we would know our work schedule a week in advance. You don’t know how many times it’s been 10:30 at night and you still don’t know if you are going to work to 11:30, 12:30, 1:30 or what.”

Another young worker said, “Everyone is upset. There definitely should be a fight. They brought us in on false hopes. People quit their jobs in order to work here, and now they are being let go.”

While he did not like Trump, he said, workers were given no alternative in the 2016 elections. “People are fed up with all politicians. The election became a sideshow. They said let us run these two clowns and see who wins.”

Justin, a young worker who transferred from a GM battery plant, said, “I haven’t been here a year and I’m getting kicked out. I’ve worked at GM for two years as a temporary worker, which is supposed to be enough to qualify for a full-time position. But they won’t let you transfer your time from your previous plant if you get transferred.”

The layoffs will have a broad impact across the Detroit area, which is already one of the poorest in the nation. A truck driver who stopped at Dan & Vi’s Pizza, down the street from the plant, told the *WSWS Autoworkers Newsletter*, “I work 60 hours a week and still can’t afford a place to live. How are we supposed to afford to buy the cars they build over there? The idiots who are making all the money, don’t they know it’s all going to dry up?”

“Trump and Clinton, what do they have in common with us?”

“It’s terrible what is happening to the GM workers,” a Detroit firefighter who stopped at the pizzeria, said. “It’s what big businesses are doing all over. Here in Detroit they robbed our pensions during the bankruptcy.”

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