

“They’re laying people off and scattering them to the winds to find employment”

GM layoffs of 1,300 workers at Detroit assembly plant

By a reporting team
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Thirteen hundred workers lost their jobs Friday when General Motors phased out the second shift at its Detroit-Hamtramck assembly plant. The layoffs are a major blow to workers and to the city, which is already the poorest big city in America with an official unemployment rate of nearly 10 percent and a real jobless rate much higher.

While some workers have enough seniority to transfer to other plants, many losing their jobs were temporary workers promised by GM and the United Auto Workers (UAW) that they would be turned into full-time, permanent workers. Now, less than a year after being hired onto the new shift to meet increased demand, they are being laid off, months, if not weeks, short of qualifying for transfers and supplemental unemployment benefits. Medical coverage will be terminated at the end of the month.

Neither the national nor local news media covered the layoffs. President Trump and Detroit Mayor Duggan, a Democrat who has touted the “comeback of the city,” did not say a word about the loss of 1,300 jobs. As for the UAW—which has a 9.4 percent ownership stake in GM and a seat on its board of directors—it was silent on the layoffs, sending out a text instead quoting a 1970 speech by former union president Walter Reuther saying, “This union is not about Solidarity House; it is not about your local union headquarters; this union is about the men and women that we represent.”

The UAW forced through a contract in 2015 that expanded the use of lower-paid temporary workers to facilitate layoffs such as these. The world’s third largest automaker made \$12 billion in pre-tax profits in

2016, up from \$11 billion in 2015, from its North American operations, with industry analysts pointing to the benefits of the UAW contract, which allows the dumping of workers when demand is down without paying for early retirement buyouts. The company is currently spending \$12 billion on stock buybacks and dividends for its richest investors.

A WSWs *Autoworker Newsletter* reporting team spoke to workers outside the GM Detroit-Hamtramck Assembly Plant on the last day on the job for the 1,300 workers who are being laid off.

Workers expressed widespread bitterness and anger over the layoffs. Several noted that while permanent GM employees were being laid off, the company was retaining many temporary workers, who do not have the full rights and benefits of regular workers and can be super-exploited by management.

Many workers told the WSWs it was a “terrible” day and that they were disgusted, both with GM management and the UAW.

One worker with eight years at GM said, “I have been through this myself. I know what it is like. I have been a temporary worker before. The mood in the plant is very sad.”

Larry, a young worker at the plant, said he was one of those facing layoff. “A lot of people are going to be affected. People are bracing for it, to get prepared. You got to figure out a way to somehow keep going.

“A few people are going over to the Romulus plant, maybe about 10 percent. There are also some workers being sent over to first shift. But, I would say about 75 percent are being laid off. They are out in the street. It

is terrible we have to go through this.”

Mike, a worker with 5 years at the plant, said, “I feel bad. They are not being given a chance to hire in as permanent workers. Most of them are temps, but they are really great workers.”

He spoke about the silence of the UAW and the big business media on the layoffs. “I wish it would garner some attention. I think all this talk about Russia is a big witch-hunt and a diversion. They are trying to take our focus off the issue of jobs.

“They should not be just laying people off and scattering them to the winds to find employment. Some of the workers here are really disgruntled. They thought they would be hired in and now they are out of jobs. It doesn’t add up. With GM making record profits.”

Asked his view on the role of the UAW, he added, “GM and the UAW are in each other’s pockets.”

A temporary GM worker who is facing layoff stopped to talk. She said only workers who clock in for work Friday, the last day before the layoff, would be eligible for recall in the future. “If you don’t come in today, you are automatically disqualified.

“It is not so bad for me because I have another job, but I have friends that work for GM and I think it is unfair. They worked really hard. GM made all these promises.

“It makes you feel unappreciated, that you are walking away with nothing. You did all this work and you might not be called back. Not everyone has a backup plan.

“We didn’t get any profit sharing. Everyone makes the same cars, but not everyone gets the profit sharing, which isn’t fair.”

She commented on the news blackout of the layoffs by the big business media. “I think it is really unfortunate. It affects a lot of people. It is like we are just numbers to them. We are replaceable. If something happens you just find someone else to do it.”

“This is my last day at work,” said Mike, a young worker who quit another job to hire into GM. “I missed qualifying for transfer rights by one week. Others missed out on SUB (supplemental unemployment benefits) by weeks. I’m originally from the coal and steel mining area near Pittsburgh. I had another job but I thought the auto industry would be more secure and better paying. Now, less than a year later, I’m out of work like a lot of others.”

Willie, a worker at New Center Stamping, an auto parts supplier that provides panels and assemblies for the Big Three in Detroit, also spoke to the WSWS. He said he was aware of the layoffs taking place.

“Who is looking out for the workers? I have a friend that works for Fiat Chrysler. He asked me what I was going to do. It is sad, they have families. Everyone needs to take care of their families.

“It is bad that a job lays you off. It seems no one has anyone’s back. You don’t want to be out here on the street, with a wife and children and have no way to take care of them.

“I keep thinking about it. In this city, we need more neighborhoods to be rebuilt. It would be nice to look at something besides fields and abandoned houses. But no one is saying anything. This is a good city. We need a chance to rebuild. There are a lot of people who want to work and take care of their families.”

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