

“Everybody—Ford, Chrysler, GM—needs to strike right now”

Autoworkers’ outrage grows over GM plant closings

By Jerry White
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Outrage inside auto factories and working communities is growing is over General Motors’ announcement Monday that it is closing five plants in the United States and Canada and wiping out the jobs of nearly 15,000 hourly and salaried workers. Declaring that the “actions will increase the long-term profit and cash generation potential,” GM CEO Mary Barra said that three assembly plants in Detroit, Lordstown, Ohio and Oshawa, Ontario would be closed next year, along with two transmission plants in Baltimore, Maryland and the Detroit suburb of Warren, Michigan.

The Detroit-based automaker recorded a 38 percent increase in its third-quarter North American profits and is on the way to making \$10 billion in profits this year and \$42 billion over the last five years. Wall Street celebrated the shutdown announcement, driving up GM shares by nearly 7 percent, assured that much of the estimated \$6.5 billion in cost savings by 2020 would be funneled to wealthy investors through continued stock buybacks and dividend payments.

The job cuts were praised in major editorials in the *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post* and other corporate controlled media. Trump and the Democrats who handed GM a \$500 million corporate tax break, along with the United Auto Workers (UAW) union, have issued phony protests centered on demands that GM shut plants in China and Mexico. However, both big business parties and the UAW support the relentless campaign to drive down the wages and conditions of workers in order to channel more money to the corporate and financial elite.

“This is capitalism at its finest,” Angela, a Fiat Chrysler worker from Kokomo, Indiana said of the plant closings. “This shows that they don’t give a damn about anything but the stock market. Christmas is coming, and I can only imagine the pressure these workers will be under when they try to buy gifts for their kids knowing they won’t have a job next year.

“When Trump and the media say the economy has never been so good and there’s record low unemployment, they are piling the BS high. I can’t think of any other country in the world that is propagandized more than America. Then they tell us it’s Mexico or China’s fault, or that desperate immigrants are taking jobs... I’m just nauseated by all the scapegoating.

“What has changed since the 2008 crash? They bailed out the super-rich and all the corporations. But for us workers, we got nothing. How secure are our jobs? We’re desperate and dodging

creditors, and this is supposed to be the best of times.”

The global financial crash in 2008 was followed by Obama’s 2009 bankruptcy restructuring of GM and Chrysler, which led to the halving of the wages of all new workers, the end of the eight-hour day, and the elimination of the Jobs Bank, which provided some semblance of income protection to laid off workers.

In exchange for handing over these concessions, the UAW was given control of a multi-billion retiree health care trust and the largest chunk of GM’s corporate shares. After selling 40 million shares back to the company last February—for a return of a cool \$1.6 billion—the UAW still retains 100 million shares currently valued at \$3.67 billion. When GM stock shot up after the plant closing announcement, the value of the union’s holdings rose by \$214 million.

As it has done for the last four decades, the UAW pushed through contracts in 2009 and 2011 and 2015, based on the lie that increasing the profits of the corporations would “secure” jobs.

Faced with a growing number of strikes and mass protests by workers in the US and around the world this year, the move by GM is a signal to Wall Street that there will be no let up on extracting maximum profits from workers. In particular, the job cuts are meant to beat back the militancy of 140,000 GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler autoworkers who are determined to win back lost income and win substantial gains when their four-year labor agreements expire in September 2019.

GM’s announcement was followed by Ford’s decision to cut a shift at two of its plants, eliminating 500 jobs each at its Louisville Assembly plant in Kentucky and Flat Rock plant in the downriver suburbs of Detroit. The company claims there will be no permanent layoffs because workers will be shifted to other plants. However, the jobs of many temporary part-time (TPT) and short-term supplemental (STS) workers, who pay union dues but do not have the slightest job protections, are in peril.

A worker at the nearby Kentucky Transmission Plant told the WSWWS, “The Louisville Assembly Plant just announced today that they’re laying people off. We’ve heard 500 people are going to be transferred to our plant. But what’s going to happen to the TPT, STS workers there? Most of them are going to be out of a job. It’s totally unacceptable.”

“I am not surprised by what GM has done,” a GM contract

worker in the Detroit area said. “It is cut, slash and burn, destroying people, families and communities. Look at Detroit 40 years ago. It was absolutely beautiful. Now look at Flint. Everything they touch turns to s**t.”

If workers do not stop the plant closures, it will mean the further devastation of Detroit, Oshawa and the cities surrounding the Lordstown plant in Ohio, which have already been ravaged by decades of deindustrialization and chronic poverty. A low estimate is that the ripple effect of the closures would lead to the elimination of another 35,000 related jobs in supplier plants and service industries.

“We should strike across America. Everybody—Ford, Chrysler, GM, everybody—needs to strike right now,” a GM worker from the targeted Detroit-Hamtramck plant told the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter*.

Tommy, who is already laid off from the Lordstown plant, said, “We have a lot of people that are really pissed off and feel like we were kicked to the curb. We are ready to do something to fight back.”

“This needs to be a movement all across America,” another Lordstown worker said. “We need to consider it as a movement because defeat is not an option.”

“The fight is for jobs. They are continually taking jobs away,” said a young TPT worker at the FCA Sterling Heights Assembly Plant who previously worked at the Detroit-Hamtramck GM plant. “There are a lot of workers at that plant that are trying to get enough time in for retirement. The closure will affect workers throughout the Detroit area, including businesses and suppliers.

“The TPT workers like me will be hit the hardest,” she added, noting that those workers have no seniority or recall rights.

Among autoworkers, there is universal hatred of the UAW, which is mired in a corruption scandal involving the transfer of millions of dollars in bribes from Fiat Chrysler executives in exchange for signing pro-company labor agreements. Shortly before GM wiped out the second of three shifts at Lordstown last year, former UAW Vice President at GM Cindy Estrada signed a deal behind the backs of workers allowing GM to outsource jobs to a lower-paying contractor.

“The UAW knew this was coming,” Dick, an FCA Toledo Jeep worker said of the closures. “Estrada probably laid the groundwork for this. I’m sure that GM is going to wheel and deal to get more tax breaks and will try to squeeze workers next year during the contract negotiations. The company is going to dangle these plants to get workers to accept more takeaways.

“I bet that the UAW will pick GM as the target company and will tell workers they are going to have to bite the bullet if they want their jobs back. If there is going to be a fight, it’s going to have to come from the workers themselves.”

“As for the UAW,” added Angela, the Kokomo FCA transmission worker, “this is an organization that will accept bribes, will give their top officers pay raises and build them cottages in Black Lake in the midst of a corruption scandal. They see the writing on the wall. Workers are going to abandon them and stop paying dues, and they want to steal everything they can before going down.

“The only ones who are going to fight these plant closings are

the workers themselves. They tell us to speak the truth to power, but the problem is those in power already know the truth about what they are doing to us, and they don’t give a damn about us. The working class is going to have to stand up and take the power from them.”

Mark, a 26-year-old temporary part-time worker at GM’s Detroit-Hamtramck plant, said he only found out about the closure “the day after, on the news. It’s really disheartening. They told us they’re ‘sorry’ we found out this way. As far as the union president goes, we haven’t heard anything.”

After high school, Mark worked at Walmart on and off for four years at \$10 per hour. He got a job as a TPT worker at GM four years ago but has never been able to become permanent. He has had to move plants multiple times because of temporary shutdowns or closures, and every time he loses his seniority and so is never able to get a permanent job. “I’ve been jumping from plant to plant,” he said. Most recently, he left his position at GM’s Lake Orion plant in the summer of 2017 because of the extended shutdown. He is earning \$15 per hour and does not know what he will do in response to the announced closure.

“GM is just padding their pockets,” he said. “We get the short end. That’s the way it works. We’re used to it in America. The people that need the most get the least. The ones on top look after themselves. If you’re in the working class, you have to work constantly just to survive. They won’t ever give you the chance to live comfortably. You would think we’d be better treated since we’re the ones who actually make the company work from day to day, and they couldn’t do it without us.”

With no savings, Mark said he could not afford a major repair on his car if it broke down. “I can afford basic necessities,” he said. “It’s a struggle. It gets frustrating coming out of here at 5 or 6 am, and a lot of us get home at 8 or 9 pm. Then right away you’re back here all over.”

He said he thought every worker had the right to a permanent full-time job, not just in the United States but internationally. “Everybody deserves a job. If we fought together in different countries to make sure we’re on the same page, with the same wage, I think we could make an impact. I feel like the working class needs to work together more as a class and make it so that it’s not the few rich that just dictate to the poor. It’s unjust and unfair. We should just divide up all the wealth so that everyone has the same amount.”

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