

Canadian auto parts workers stage wildcat strike as Oshawa GM plant closure looms

By Carl Bronski
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Day shift workers at the Syncreon and Ceva Logistics auto parts feeder plants to Oshawa's General Motors assembly operation staged a one-day wildcat strike against management's derisory severance offers last Thursday. The two facilities employ over 550 workers, members of Unifor, who will lose their jobs when the Oshawa GM plant is shuttered in November.

The two walkouts were initiated by workers independently of the union after Unifor failed to negotiate severance deals above the paltry minimum government standards.

Syncreon worker Karen Young, expressing the sentiments of hundreds of workers, told *Metroland Media*, "We walked to draw attention to our plight ... most people believe we're leaving with more than we are and to send a message to the company. We've continued to work for the last five months even though they continued not to negotiate with us, we hit our numbers and we deserve some respect."

Union officials were openly hostile to the workers' actions. They visited the picket lines to instruct the afternoon shifts to go into work. At the same time, Unifor Local 222 president Colin James, ever concerned over even a brief disruption to GM production targets, was quick to release a statement that the job action was not sanctioned by the union. Calls from the strikers for supportive job actions to be organized at the GM assembly plant were of course ignored by Unifor.

Unifor's decision to side with the bosses against striking workers triggered widespread disgust. One worker wrote on social media, "The suppliers that are Unifor affiliated are getting left behind with next to nothing for packages yet paying the dues, it's about time they start shutting GM down."

Another wrote, "How can you say Colin James, sir, that the walk out was not sanctioned. It's high time that these people got a decent package. It's a shame that after so many years of working & contributing towards the union dues, you can't do anything about a decent package. Shame." Another wrote sarcastically, "Colin James, sorry to hear, you don't have any control over your membership anymore?"

With the closure of the Oshawa General Motors assembly plant scheduled for late November, eliminating some 2,500 production jobs, at least 2,500 additional unionized workers at myriad auto parts suppliers, warehouses, and transport depots

also face permanent layoff. For several months, they have been protesting meager severance packages offered by their employers.

As anger among rank-and-file workers directed towards Unifor continues to mount, Unifor President Jerry Dias has attempted to evade any responsibility for the miserable severance packages on offer. He told reporters last month, "I understand their frustration, they have a right to be frustrated, but they should aim the gun at the right place, we're going to do what we can for them."

An examination of "what the union can do" turns out to be nothing for the Syncreon and Ceva workers. At Syncreon, management has offered one week's pay for every year worked—the bare minimum required by the Ontario provincial government. At Ceva, which is regulated federally, workers will receive only two days pay for every year of employment. The maximum pay for higher seniority workers at the two facilities averages about \$165 per day.

Other feeder operations have fared no better. Many have received similar offers at or barely above the government minimum standards. About 300 workers at Lear Whitby have received the highest offer, still meager, of three to three and a half weeks pay per year of employment. Lear workers briefly struck last February in support of Oshawa GM workers.

At the GM Oshawa Assembly Plant, some 1,200 senior workers took retirement, leave to retire, or a pro-rated retirement pension—all with extra monetary incentives. Workers with 10 years or more seniority, but short of the retirement qualification, received up to a \$130,000 buyout. Full-time workers with lower seniority received buyouts between \$10,000 and \$40,000, depending on years of service. About 500 workers chose to remain with GM hoping for upwards of 300 parts stamping jobs, expected to come on stream in early 2020, or for eventual transfer to the GM engine plant in St. Catharines or the small Woodstock, Ontario parts distribution center.

For workers falling short of the various pension options, buyouts for some (at best) will cover their income for two years in a region expected to quickly be transformed into a high unemployment zone. For most, the buyouts will barely cover their income for six months or less. Such is the reality of Jerry

Dias' promise to keep the Oshawa plant open.

Dias' assurance that the GM assembly "footprint" would be maintained in Oshawa was cynically used by Unifor to prod a reluctant membership to narrowly pass another concessions-laden contract in 2016. Then, over the past winter, autoworkers witnessed the phony fire-and-brimstone theatrics of Dias. Unifor, he would yell, will not accept the closure of the Oshawa plant. The union would launch "a helluva fight" that would force GM to back down from its plan. But what did this "fight" actually consist of?

While General Motors implemented a global plan to boost the value of its shareholders' stock portfolios, shutting down five plants across North America and laying off some 15,000 workers, Unifor focused its efforts on promoting poisonous Canadian nationalism. The union's goal was to keep workers at the Oshawa plant and its related feeder plants walled off from any solidarity action with their colleagues in the United States, Mexico and around the world, even though they all faced threats to jobs and living standards. Like their counterparts in the American United Auto Workers, Unifor's nationalism has facilitated the enforcement of one round of concessions after another over the past three decades, based on the lying claim that they would save jobs.

Unifor's reactionary Canadian nationalism goes hand-in-hand with its firm support for the pro-war, pro-corporate Trudeau Liberal government, which it will push to get re-elected in the upcoming federal election campaign.

Despite Dias' bombast, the reality is that Unifor steadfastly opposed any struggle by the rank-and-file to strike or occupy the plant and fight for spreading job actions throughout the Canadian auto industry and beyond under conditions where autoworkers in the US were facing four GM plant closures.

When workers spontaneously sat down in the Oshawa plant after the initial closure announcement in November and then assembled at the union hall, Dias and Unifor Plant Chairman Greg Moffat instructed workers to report for their next shift and continue production. Similarly, when workers spontaneously stopped production on January 8 and sat down in the plant after GM confirmed it would not alter its closure decision, Moffat rushed back from Detroit to ensure the action would not turn into an occupation and led the workers out of the plant after GM management, also fearing the possibility of an occupation, ordered the shift to end early.

Later in January, Unifor organized a toothless demonstration at the gates of GM offices that was quickly dismantled. Two production stoppages at nearby parts suppliers lasting a few hours were not meant to extend beyond the length of a shift.

Meanwhile, Unifor launched a media campaign, dripping with anti-Mexican nationalist poison, calling for a consumer boycott of all GM vehicles sold in Canada that were assembled in Mexico. The vicious targeting of Mexican workers was a continuation of the union's decades-old whip-saw tactics that have pit workers in one country against those in another and set

the stage for a never-ending race to the bottom for ever diminishing jobs and wages.

The anti-Mexican campaign was launched as more than 70,000 maquiladora workers in Matamoros, Mexico, conducted a courageous strike against the foreign-owned auto parts companies and corrupt unions. The strike led to a shortage of steering wheels and other parts, a slowdown of production across North America, and messages of solidarity by Canadian and US GM, Ford and Fiat Chrysler workers.

The wildcat action by workers at Syncreon and Ceva shows that autoworkers are more than ready to fight. The crucial task is to mobilize the deep-seated anger and opposition into a conscious struggle against the corporate bosses and their union hirelings, and provide it with a clear political perspective.

A genuine fight to stop plant shutdowns, layoffs and concessions will only be organized if rank-and-file autoworkers across North America break decisively with the pro-corporate unions to organize their own action committees. These committees must coordinate strikes, plant occupations, and other protests to shut down the entire auto industry to achieve workers' demands for secure, decent-paying jobs. Such a struggle, which will be bitterly resisted by Unifor and their capitalist allies in the corporate boardrooms and government offices, requires workers to turn to a socialist and internationalist program. Only on this basis can they mobilize the full social power of the international working class against concessions, plant closures, and job cuts.

We urge workers interested in joining this fight to participate in the WSWS *Autoworker Newsletter* call in meeting Thursday August 8 at 7:30 p.m. (Eastern Time).

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>