

Court orders end to “unlawful” Windsor, Ontario auto parts strike

By Carl Bronski
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One hundred and eighty auto parts workers at Windsor, Ontario’s NemaK plant continued their protest Thursday against the company’s announcement that it will close the facility in 2020. On Labour Day Monday, Unifor president Jerry Dias and Local 200 officials held a press conference outside the plant to announce that the complex would be blockaded until corporate management honoured an earlier contractual agreement to keep the plant open until 2022. Pickets were then set up to prevent management from removing equipment from the plant.

On Tuesday night, when workers were scheduled to return from a long holiday weekend, pickets were buttressed by hundreds of other local off-duty auto parts workers and production workers from the nearby Fiat Chrysler assembly plant. In response, company management sought and obtained a court order Wednesday that ruled the protest an “unlawful strike” and ordered the union to immediately end the job action.

Workers, however, remained on strike Thursday, as NemaK lawyers returned to the courts and, late Thursday, won a second ruling finding union officials in contempt and ordering the local police to enforce the initial court order. As of Thursday evening, neither the union nor the police have so far acted upon the order. “We’re hopeful the company and union will work things out,” said Windsor Police Staff Sergeant Karel DeGraaf.

In earlier remarks made to the press, both Unifor national President Jerry Dias and Local 200 leader John D’Agnolo indicated that the job action would continue until NemaK honoured its commitments.

Significantly Dias never mentioned the imminent contract battle of American autoworkers or call for unity between workers on both sides of the border

including workers in Mexico. Oozing nationalist poison Dias declared, “In order to move our jobs to Mexico, they’re either going to sue us or they’re going to throw me in jail.”

Workers have heard such language before. After the announcement of the GM Oshawa plant closure last November, Dias issued blood-curdling cries of “No Surrender” to the prospect of 2,600 assembly job losses and another 2,500 parts plant layoffs combined with calls for a boycott of Mexican-built GM vehicles, only to eventually bow quietly to the jobs massacre. And in Windsor, Dias and the Local 444 leadership mounted no opposition when Fiat-Chrysler recently announced its “business decision” to end the third shift and lay off 1,500 workers.

Despite the reactionary nationalist bluster of Dias the struggle at NemaK epitomizes the international character of the autoworkers fight and the need for a global strategy in defense of jobs. NemaK is a Mexico-based corporation, with operations in Canada and producing components for auto assembly in China and the US.

The Windsor plant manufactures aluminum engine blocks for General Motors’ Chevrolet Colorado diesel pickup made in Missouri and GM Kentucky’s Chevrolet Corvette, as well as for the Cadillac CTS destined for the Chinese market.

If Dias has again ratcheted up his bombast it is because he senses workers have had enough of the relentless attacks launched against them by the auto companies in complete collusion with Unifor, which acts as the junior partners of the corporations.

Comments posted on Unifor’s Facebook page featuring Dias’ Windsor speech indicates some of workers mounting anger. Keith Starr, a 3rd generation Oshawa autoworker, wrote, “Unifor, after you lost our

GM Oshawa plant and shifts from Chrysler and recently announced Ford and Bombardier, why would I support your losing battle?” And in a follow-up comment, he wrote, “You already said ‘they [Nemak] will live up to their agreement’. I remember you said that when GM announced that and Oshawa was looking down the barrel. What happened? GM pulled the trigger and now my home city will see how devastating Unifor’s fail will be.”

Bryon Duncan, a production worker at GM Oshawa, remarked succinctly, “Don’t listen when he [Dias] says go back to work while they negotiate. It’s a lie.” Said Tyson Beasley, “Hopefully this fight goes better than the last fight at the GM plant.”

Wishing the Windsor strikers good luck, Alexis Rame wrote, “It didn’t work for GM OSHAWA when Jerry said the same for us.”

Indeed, it was only a matter of hours before Dias was preparing for his inevitable climb-down, assuring his bosses at the Detroit Three auto companies that they will get their Nemak engine parts. “They [Nemak] have customers that they have to satisfy, and ultimately they will be able to fulfill their agreements to their customers—once they fulfill the agreement they signed with us.”

Dias bases his assurances on what he has termed an “ironclad” contract with Nemak. In 2016 Unifor negotiated a new agreement that promised production until 2022 in exchange for a wage freeze for the last three years of the deal. Wages for production workers have stagnated for years and begin at about \$16 per hour. In addition to the wage concessions surrendered by Unifor, Nemak accepted \$4.5 million in federal and provincial grants to develop its technological processes.

Only months ago, in Oshawa, Dias assured workers that the GM closure announcement violated the contract and “they weren’t going to get away with it.” In fact, contained in every contract negotiated by Unifor is the notorious “market conditions” clause, a catch-all that is used again and again by management to override so called job guarantees.

Hundreds of workers were laid off at the engine parts plant before Nemak took full ownership of the facility from the Ford Motor Company in 2010. Since then, production at the plant has been steadily reduced and stands at just 25 percent capacity today. In their closure announcement, management noted that it would lose

the Cadillac CTS contract in 2020, further dropping plant productive capacity to ten percent and, in a “business decision,” requiring it to relocate the remaining work to one of its Mexican facilities.

Unifor, like all the trade unions, acknowledges from the very outset of their relations with the corporations the “right” of management to make its business decisions unhindered, rooted as these decisions are in the sanctity of the private ownership of the factories, mines, railroads, depots, technologies, etc., by the world’s billionaires.

Autoworkers in Windsor must oppose and actively resist any attempt to break their strike either by the police or another rotten sellout by Unifor. They should seize the initiative by establishing a rank-and-file committee to take control of their struggle out of the hands of the corrupt Unifor bureaucrats. These committees should immediately declare their support for a common fight with autoworkers in the United States, Mexico and internationally in order to overturn the decades of concessions and secure decent-paying, permanent jobs for all.

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