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North America

# No Plant Closings! Plant Conversion to Save Workers and the Planet

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### What would it take to keep these assembly and transmission plants open?

As autoworkers have begun to formulate demands for the opening of the 2019 contract negotiations, GM upped the ante by announcing the loss of 14,000 jobs with the closure of three assembly plants and two transmission plants to add to the two million manufacturing jobs already lost due to plant closures. Immediately the workers at the Oshawa, Ontario plant walked off their jobs, taking their fight to the city streets. Later in the day, they rallied at their local headquarters where UNIFOR president Jerry Dias vowed to fight to keep the plant open.

At the other end of the spectrum, some politicians are already telling GM they have only to ask workers what must be done to get their agreement, as if more concessions will save these jobs and despite GM's \$2.5 billion profit in the third quarter of 2018. What would it take to keep these assembly and transmission plants open? GM's CEO Mary Barra explained that the corporation can no longer be considered an auto company but one transformed by a technology based on electrification and autonomous driving with "a vision of a world with zero emissions." However no product currently matches that vision. By closing these plants GM can save \$6 billion by the end of 2020. Ironically, one of the vehicles being eliminated is the Volt, an electric car crossover that is an actual contribution. In its place GM will continue to promote SUV's and trucks, revealing their utter hypocrisy. The arrogance and determination in Barra's announcement shows the corporation's strategy: First, they attempt to head off any notion that workers have the power to seek any better conditions of employment in the upcoming contract. Second, they place the corporation's reorganization on the backs of the workers. Nothing could make it clearer what Wall Street considers important than to have GM's stock to go up by six percent due to this announcement.

These closings are despite enormous tax breaks GM has received and will continue to receive. In Detroit there was the destruction of an entire community through the use of eminent domain when they built the now-to-be-closed plant. In its place is threatened acres of cement to complement the many acres of bare land and devastation that continue in Detroit from the many previous years of job loss thanks to the auto industry. Oshawa, Baltimore and Lordstown communities as well as others will be equally traumatized.

GM announced the plant closings to the public without forewarning the UAW or Canadian union leaders. These closings are a violation of negotiated contract language. Once again the joint approach adopted by both unions in its relations with the auto companies can be seen as utterly worthless.

While rank-and-file workers have been demanding the protections and necessities they need to lead fulfilling lives for themselves and their families, UAW leaders have been ready to cooperate in meeting the company's needs and have been accepting personal benefits, ripping off so-called negotiated joint funds. In fact, past concessions even allowed the outsourcing of such plant departments as maintenance and material handling, reducing jobs.

A decade ago the U.S. and Canadian governments bailed out General Motors. Washington's terms also demanded that autoworkers, who had no say in the corporation's decisions, make a total wage and benefit package that was no greater than that of non-unionized workers. While union officials on both sides of the border supported the bailout, Autoworkers Caravan, a grouping of autoworkers and retirees, drove to DC and put forward an alternative plan. They opposed the provision for workers to sacrifice for the corporation and called for the establishment of a mass transportation system that could drastically reduce reliance on fossil fuels. Any idled plant could be converted into manufacturing buses, trains or products needed for converting to alternative energy sources such as wind turbines. They pointed to how quickly auto companies had converted to war production during the world wars to indicate this program could begin within months. Instead nothing was demanded from General Motors, and it made a swift

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recovery. Plants that could have been converted were torn down, eliminating thousands of potential jobs.

Over the decade GM, like Chrysler and Ford, imposed harsh conditions on its workforce. New hires earned half the wages and fewer benefits than those already employed, but more frequently were hired as “temporaries.” This process of building a two-tier workforce weakened the union, as one person working next to another might make significantly less, have a lesser health care package, little job security and face a future without a pension or health care in retirement.

When workers demanded an end to this practice in 2015 negotiations, the company and UAW officials worked out an eight-year bridge in wages for a four-year contract. The contract barely passed. Workers who voted no pointed out that the bridge didn't bring up the benefits of the lower-waged worker, restore cost-of-living adjustments to the wage package, or provide healthcare for workers who would retire. The contract also didn't curb the companies' ability to keep workers on temporary status or hire workers through an outsourced company.

Given the reorganization of the Big Three, which Chrysler and Ford are already implementing, U.S. and Canadian auto workers must make a decision: to fight for their right to a decent job or submit to further layoffs and concessionary bargaining.

After the Oshawa workers announced their determination to oppose their impending layoffs in the streets, a quickly organized union meeting began to discuss strategy. Someone raised the idea of a possible plant takeover. A fight back committee is being organized. Jerry Dias has called for a united strategy with the UAW, and ties are being established between the affected locals to share ideas on how to build the struggle. Obviously any strategy needs to be tied to how the talents and experience of the workers can be used to build something useful for the 21st Century.

There is no better demand than the call for the development of a mass transportation system that autoworkers could build. Of course corporations like GM are just paying lip service to moving toward zero emissions. Yet, public and union support can be brought to bear due to the need to keep the plants open. If we are to deal with the already visible signs of extreme climate, filling these plants with the products necessary to save the planet offers a concrete way forward. We need to demand buses for mass transit “ and if GM isn't interested, then federal and state money (or in the case of Ontario, provincial money) can retool to build the mass transit system North America needs.

It will take the energy of autoworkers and their communities in all of North America “ including Mexico “ to accomplish a takeover and reorganization of these plants. Workers' livelihood and our very planet depend on it!

*December 18, 2018*

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