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GM agrees to meet as workers man blockade

Bal Brach, Canwest News Service



Tyler Anderson/National Post

A blockade set up by hundreds of General Motors employees Wednesday morning may soon be removed after GM announced it will meet with the Canadian Auto Workers union Friday in Detroit.

CAW members and their supporters erected the roadblock in front of GM Canada's headquarters in Oshawa, Ont., to protest the automaker's decision to effectively shut down the truck

facility in this city next year.

CAW members set up the blockade along the road leading to the GM headquarters early Wednesday morning to protest what they call a blatant betrayal of a contract settlement reached two weeks ago.

"There is no trust with their employer, and why would there be? We just signed a new three-year collective agreement . . . and General Motors has taken that away from us," said CAW Local 222 president Chris Buckley.

"I am encouraging my members to remain on their jobs," he added. "I want my members to continue to build the best trucks and cars in the industry."

However, he said "when their shift is complete, they're more than welcome to join us here at this protest."

In a show of solidarity, supporters from other CAW locals across Ontario were expected to travel to Oshawa to join their colleagues.

"The mood right now is very upbeat," Mr. Buckley said. "The membership is looking for the union to take some action - that's exactly what we've done."

CAW president Buzz Hargrove estimates about 2,600 Oshawa auto workers will be out of a job when the plant ceases production next year.

He said the move violates the contract settlement, in which GM committed to assemble products at the Oshawa plant in exchange for hundreds of millions of dollars worth of labour-cost reductions.

Meanwhile, David Paterson, vice-president of corporate and environmental affairs for GM Canada,

said the company has set up a meeting with the CAW for Friday in Detroit.

While Wednesday's protest did not disrupt production, Mr. Paterson said most CAW members employed at the Oshawa headquarters worked from home because of the blockade.

Mr. Paterson said he understands the frustration of employees, but the industry is undergoing a structural shift and GM had few options.

GM announced the closure of the Oshawa plant Tuesday as part of a shift toward cars and crossover utility vehicles as high gasoline prices kill demand for its biggest vehicles. The company will also halt production at two plants in the United States and one in Mexico.

"The bottom line is that it does not make sense to produce products that people aren't buying," he said.

"We really have to make this move from trucks to cars. It's really difficult so we're going to help our employees through this difficult change."

Some of that help may come in the form of early pensions, according to Mr. Paterson.

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