

Just Transition for Production Workers in Canada's Auto Industry

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The Labour Education Centre (LEC) delivers training, education and research programs that help workers, potential workers and all members of our community access decent work and move communities towards social, economic, racial and environmental justice.

LEC is an Employment Ontario service provider offering both Employment Services and Literacy and Basic Skills programs. LEC delivered an Ontario Rapid Skills program to train auto workers in Oshawa for entry into the construction trades in 2019. LEC has worked with several Action Centres in southern Ontario over the past 20 years.

LEC's Working Green 2050 program researches and advocates for Just Transition programs for workers and communities.

LEC is the workforce development agency of the Toronto and York Region Labour Council, which represents over 220,000 workers in all sectors of the economy.

For LEC's previous research on national and international Just Transition programs:

<https://www.laboureducation.org/transitioning-to-a-low-carbon-economy/>



The [Future Skills Centre \(FSC\)](#) is a forward-thinking centre for research and collaboration dedicated to driving innovation in skills development so that everyone in Canada can be prepared for the future of work. We partner with policymakers, researchers, practitioners, employers and labour, and post-secondary institutions to solve pressing labour market challenges and ensure that everyone can benefit from relevant lifelong learning opportunities. We are founded by a consortium whose members are Toronto Metropolitan University, Blueprint, and Signal49 Research, and are funded by the [Government of Canada's Future Skills Program](#).



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This report was undertaken without participation by Unifor officials and does not necessarily reflect the position of that union.

Just Transition for Production Workers in Canada's Auto Industry

This project was designed to investigate how Ontario workers experience major transitions in employment and training. It examined the experiences of auto workers laid off in 2025 at a time when the US Trump administration unilaterally imposed a 25% tariff on auto and auto parts imported into the US.

Research Questions

This research set out to explore three interrelated questions:

1. How do laid-off auto workers describe the experience of job loss during retooling in the context of trade and tariff disruptions.
2. What supports or barriers do they encounter when seeking retraining or re-employment?
3. What are the social, financial, and emotional consequences of being laid off from auto manufacturing?

Executive Summary

Ontario's auto sector is undergoing one of the most significant transformations in its history as production shifts from internal combustion engine (ICE) vehicles to electric vehicles (EVs). This transition, compounded by trade disruptions and tariffs introduced under the Trump administration, has created deep uncertainty for workers and their communities.

In the past downturns in the auto sector have been seen as temporary, such as a financial crisis or the COVID pandemic that would come to a finite end, and that demand for autos would bounce back, as would jobs.

Canada has had an auto industry for over 100 years. What Canada is facing now is the stated intention of the Trump administration to move Canadian jobs to the US by using tariffs to force American auto companies to end Canadian (and Mexican) production and investment. The US tariffs also affect non US companies with significant Canadian investments notably Honda and Toyota, and create uncertainty for other companies that may consider investing in Canada. Canadian industry, government and indeed workers hopes are based on the possibility of President Trumps' tariff policies being curtailed by American courts or Congress. If neither of these brakes are applied, Canada faces the possibility of sectoral collapse of its auto industry.

In addition to the tariffs the Trump administration is making moves to stymie the transition to EVs by undoing gasoline fuel economy regulations, pulling back on EV related infrastructure and undoing consumer EV rebates and other subsidies.

With the pausing of the federal Incentives for Zero-Emission Vehicles (iZEV) program in early 2025, there are no EV consumer rebates in Ontario.

Between 2023 and 2024, tens of thousands of assembly, parts, and service workers across Ontario; Brampton, Oakville, Windsor-Essex, and Chatham-Kent faced layoffs as plants retooled. Many workers remain unsure when—or if—they will be recalled. While retooling is intended to modernize production, delays, cancelled projects, cross border tariffs and stated U.S. intentions of moving Canadian auto jobs to the US have left entire communities in a state of suspended transition.

Against this backdrop, the Labour Education Centre conducted a qualitative research study, funded by the Future Skills Centre, to document the lived experiences of laid-off auto workers and to examine how Ontario's evolving education and training systems are supporting—or failing to support—them.

Key Findings: Laid-Off Auto Workers

Participants described the layoffs as financially destabilizing and emotionally draining. Most relied on federal Employment Insurance (EI), Supplemental Unemployment Benefits (SUB), or the Income Maintenance Plan (IMP), the latter two negotiated by Unifor. These financial supports helped cover essentials but were insufficient for long-term stability. Workers with lower seniority often exhausted benefits sooner, intensifying financial strain and uncertainty.

Retraining was widely viewed as desirable, but structural barriers limited access. Out of the 32 laid-off auto workers interviewed, only a small number had entered or were in the process of entering retraining programs. One participant had formally enrolled in a Better Jobs Ontario program, two others planned to begin courses in electric vehicle (EV) technology, and one woman was pursuing trades training. Most, however, did not pursue retraining. The main reasons included uncertainty about being recalled back to work after retooling, lengthy and confusing approval processes, inconsistent information from employment offices, concerns about losing eligibility for future funding, and practical barriers such as transportation, costs, and the challenge of returning to formal education after years in production work.

Union-run POWER Centres and Action Centres were praised as trusted sources of support. These centres operate on a peer-to-peer model, the staff are often laid-off workers themselves—trusted colleagues who understand the culture of the plants and the emotional toll of job loss. This peer connection made workers more comfortable seeking help and sharing their experiences, reinforcing the value of community-based, worker-led supports.

Unfortunately, these centres are stretched far too thin, often serving thousands of displaced workers with only a handful of staff and limited operational funding. Staff are expected to balance intake, counselling, referrals, and community outreach with little administrative support, making it difficult to provide the level of individualized attention that workers need during such a disruptive period. As a result, even though the centres were viewed as essential lifelines, their capacity to offer sustained, one-on-one assistance was constrained by chronic under-resourcing.

Recommendations

1. No Transition Funding without a Workforce Development Plan

Require all public auto sector funding to be fully transparent and contingent upon agreement by a joint workplace union-management workforce development committee with operational funding.

2. Governance and Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration

As envisioned by the Canada Sustainable Jobs Act (2024) create a sector-wide Auto Sectoral Transition Council involving employers, unions, Employment Ontario agencies and System Service Managers, provincial and federal governments, municipalities, post-secondary institutions and First Nations to coordinate labour market planning, ensure transparency, and align programs across ministries and levels of governments to worker and community needs.

3. Industrial and Economic Strategy

Implement a coordinated industrial strategy that protects existing auto plants, incentivizes domestic EV and battery production, promotes local procurement, supports community redevelopment, and rewards consumers for purchasing Ontario-built EVs.

4. Lay-off Aversion Legislation

Using American Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification (WARN) legislation as a starting point, establish a lay-off aversion strategy backed by legislation. Require sufficient advance notice of lay-offs to provide workforce adjustment program in the workplace prior to closure, allow for workers to be certified for their industrial skills, and to mandate consistent, transparent communication from employers during retooling or transition periods.

5. POWER Centre and Employment Ontario Integration

Increase POWER Centre staffing and embed Employment Ontario staff on-site as needed to provide employment counseling and services, retraining navigation and actual training. Centres could also be used to deliver wrap-around supports such as mental health services, financial counselling, and referrals to other services.

6. Education and Training Reform

Create a system of micro credentials to recognize industrial and workplace skills to promote worker mobility, as part of a lay-off aversion strategy. Create programs for workplace and personal digital skills. Diversify training pathways by expanding Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) credentials for industrial skills, allow for advanced placement in trades apprentice programs.

7. Ensure Timely and Equitable Access to Better Jobs Ontario Supports

Improve the Better Jobs Ontario program by publicizing the program, streamlining approvals, aligning timelines with school intakes, simplifying applications, and incentivizing Employment Ontario staff to proactively support BJO applicants.

8. Income Security and Retirement Pathways

Pilot wage-insurance retraining subsidies in high impact areas such as Brampton and Ingersoll to maintain income stability and reduce social stress during layoffs and retraining. Expand early-retirement options while protecting pensions and benefits to take older workers out of the workforce.

9. Strengthening Worker Support Infrastructure

Remove barriers to training through childcare, transportation, and relocation supports, and expand access to adult education—particularly for newcomers and refugees.

10. Research and Evaluation

Invest in ongoing research and pilot programs to track worker outcomes, evaluate transition supports, and ensure data-driven, transparent scaling of successful models province-wide.

Introduction

The state of Canada's auto industry

The Canadian auto industry was historically built on a tariff-free foundation with the United States under the 1965 Auto Pact, which was later replaced by the Free Trade agreement (FTA 1989) North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA 1994) and then the Canada United States Mexico Agreement (CUSMA 2020). The Trump tariffs have dramatically altered this foundation.

Unifor is Canada's largest private sector union, representing workers in Ford, GM and Stellantis assembly plants as well as in numerous auto parts and related industries, and in non-auto sectors. According to Unifor Canada's auto industry directly employed 125,000 workers in 2022, including 37,000 in assembly, 17,000 in truck and trailer production, and more than 71,000 in parts manufacturing. Including indirect and spin-off employment, the sector supported an estimated 462,000 jobs. In 2022, more than 1.2 million vehicles were built in Canada, with vehicle and parts production valued at C \$81 billion. In 2024 that value had risen slightly to C \$82.2 billion.

Not often recognized in Canada is that the value of Mexican auto exports to the US is more than Canada, South Korea and Japan combined. In the first half of 2025 Mexico exported US \$85.7 billion worth of cars, trucks, buses and auto parts to the US.

When the Labour Education Centre submitted a proposal to the Future Skills Centre in December 2024, the objective was to interview Ontario auto workers whose jobs were threatened as a result of the transition to electric vehicles (EVs). The expectation was that these workers would be directly affected by declining demand for internal combustion engines (ICEs), transmissions, and other parts not required in EV production. As part of its commitment to a low carbon economy Canada (along with other countries) set a 2035 deadline to end sales of new ICE vehicles. In the short term, many workers faced temporary layoffs as companies re-tooled assembly plants for EV production.

At that time, Donald Trump had recently been elected to a second presidential term, and the extent of disruption caused by his tariff policies was not yet clear. Since then, his administration has imposed a 50% tariff on imported steel, aluminum and some forms of copper, as well as a 25% tariff on auto and auto parts. Tariffs are reduced for vehicles compliant with the Canada, US and Mexico Agreement (CUSMA) commensurate with the amount of American made parts in the vehicle. These tariffs, along with slower than anticipated up-take of EVs have caused a wave of disruption in the Canadian auto industry. The slower uptake of EV is in part caused by the Trump administration making moves to stymie the transition to EVs by undoing gasoline fuel economy regulations, pulling back on EV related infrastructure and undoing consumer EV rebates and other subsidies.

With the pausing of the federal Incentives for Zero-Emission Vehicles (iZEV) program in early 2025, there are no EV consumer rebates in Ontario. Several provinces have some consumer EV rebates in place.

Data from our interviews shows that workers are clearly anxious about their employment future in the auto industry as they watch from the sidelines as the Ontario auto industry seems to be collapsing around them.

Cost of Tariffs to US Auto Makers

In October 2025 the Anderson Economic Group reported that US \$10 billion in tariffs had already been paid by American auto companies for importing auto and auto parts from Canada and Mexico. For the Big Three, previous reporting suggested that Stellantis is forecasting between \$1.6 billion and \$2.4 billion tariff payments to the American government in 2025. GM estimates tariffs could cost the company as much as US \$4.8 billion in 2025. In August 2025 Ford announced it expects the tariffs to reduce annual profits by about \$3 billion. Smaller auto companies are also paying tariffs.

Plant Closures

Stellantis – In January 2024 Stellantis closed its Brampton plant in order to retool for both ICE and EV Jeep Compass models, displacing 3,000-3,200 workers. In February 2025 it announced a pause on that re-tooling, widely viewed as a reaction to the Trump tariffs. In October Stellantis announced it was moving the Compass production to Belvidere Illinois as part of a \$13 billion investment in the United States. The company said at the time it had plans for the Brampton plant but wouldn't reveal those until it met with Canadian governments.

General Motors - General Motors paused its BrightDrop delivery truck production in the CAMI facility in Ingersoll in April 2025, laying off 1,200 workers. The expected October 2025 recall was first extended until mid November, with only one shift of about 400 workers expected to be recalled. In October 2025 GM announced that it was abandoning production of the BrightDrop altogether.

GM Oshawa expects to lay off 750 workers on January 30, 2026 when a third shift building the Silverado pick-up truck, will be laid off. Related parts plants are also affected. . It is not clear if GM will follow-through with announced plans to partially re-tool to build heavy-duty pick-up trucks in Oshawa.

Ford – Ford closed its Oakville plant after the last Ford Edge rolled off the assembly line in May 2024. Between 3,000-3,200 workers were laid off. In July 2024 (before tariffs) Ford announced that it would not be producing EVs in Oakville but rather Super-Duty pickup trucks to augment American production to meet demand.

On October 6, 2025, the U.S. administration introduced an additional tariff on medium- and heavy-duty trucks.

Against this backdrop of economic upheaval, policy change, and heightened uncertainty for workers, the need to document and analyze worker's lived experiences became urgent. While economic indicators and employment statistics capture the scale of disruption, they do not reveal how individuals and families are coping with prolonged layoffs, shifting skill demands, or new credentialing requirements. To address this gap, our research focused on capturing workers' perspectives directly, through qualitative interviews that shed light on both the immediate and longer-term challenges of navigating industrial transition.

Recruitment and Sampling

In this study, purposive sampling was used to identify participants directly connected to the study objectives. Auto workers were recruited through social media advertising, online newspaper ads, community outreach in regions with major auto plants via flyers posted in Peel, Halton and Durham regions (see Annex 4).

More than 100 individuals initially contacted the research team expressing interest in participating as laid-off auto workers. However, it became clear that a number of these respondents were acting fraudulently—they knowingly misrepresented themselves as laid-off auto workers in an attempt to receive the \$100 honorarium offered for participation. To protect the integrity of the study, we began requesting identification from all subsequent participants to confirm their employment history and eligibility. This verification process significantly reduced the number of individuals who could participate in interviews. Each verified participant received an honorarium of \$100 for completing a one-hour online interview.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews. Thirty-two laid-off auto workers were recruited and interviewed. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants.

Interviews with auto workers focused on employment histories, the layoff process, access to income supports, retraining opportunities, and the social and emotional impacts of job loss.

Analytical Approach

An inductive thematic analysis was conducted. Interview transcripts were coded iteratively, and themes were developed around employment loss, retraining, financial stress, and educational testing experiences.

Rationale for Methods

Qualitative interviews and thematic analysis were chosen because they capture rich, detailed accounts of lived experience. A survey could have provided prevalence data but would not reveal the complexity of navigating layoffs, training programs, and credentialing requirements.

Interpretation of Findings

Stakeholders should interpret the findings as complementary perspectives rather than direct causal evidence. The auto workers' accounts reveal the conditions that make retraining necessary and challenging. It should be noted that a Grade 12 credential was not a prerequisite for recall, since laid-off workers were anticipated to return to their former positions within the auto plants

Study Limitations

This study has several limitations. The relatively small sample sizes also limit generalizability. Recruitment was voluntary, which may have introduced bias. Finally, findings reflect conditions at a particular moment in time, and future policy changes could alter the dynamics observed.

Overall, this research design is exploratory and descriptive, with explanatory insights drawn from the juxtaposition of two participant groups. These findings provide policymakers and training providers with evidence of the structural and educational hurdles that may shape Ontario workers' ability to navigate transition in the evolving labour market.

Laid-Off Auto Workers

Demographic Overview

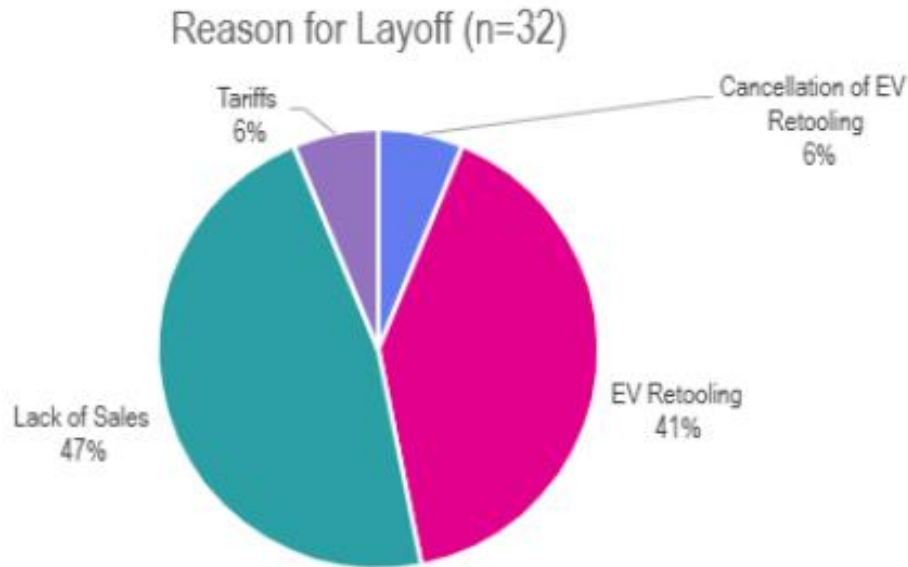
Of the 32 laid-off auto workers¹ interviewed the majority resided in three regions: Peel Region, Oxford County and the City of London. 9 participants resided in Peel Region (28%), 6 participants in Oxford County (19%), and 4 participants in the City of London (13%). Employment backgrounds clustered in four major automotive assembly plants: 13 participants worked at Stellantis Chrysler in Brampton (41%), 15 participants worked at General Motors Canadian Automotive Manufacturing Inc. (GM–CAMI) Assembly in Ingersoll (47%), 2 participants worked at GM Oshawa Assembly (6%), and 2 participants worked at Ford Oakville Assembly Complex (6%). The vast majority worked in assembly rather than parts plants, and just over half (56%) lived in the same communities where they were employed.

Respondents were largely mid-career or older: 17 participants (53%) were aged 45–54, 7 participants (22%) were 55–64, and 6 participants (19%) were between 25–34. 20 participants were men (63%), while 12 participants (38%) identified as women. In terms of race and ethnicity, 24 participants (75%) identified as white/Caucasian, while 3 participants (9%) identified as Southeast Asian, 2 (6%) participants identified as Black, 2 (6%) participants identified as West Indian/Indo-Caribbean, and 1 participant (3%) identified as Indigenous. 30 participants (94%) identified as Canadian citizens, with the remaining 2 participants (6%) identifying as permanent residents. Work histories showed significant tenure in the automotive sector, with 9 participants (28%) reporting between 16 and 20 years of service—reflecting deep ties to the industry.

Layoff Context

Participants attributed their layoffs to several interrelated factors tied to the EV transition. Fifteen participants (47%) attributed their layoff to low EV sales, thirteen participants (41%) attributed their layoff to plant closures for retooling, and two participants (6%) attributed their layoff to the ripple effects of U.S. tariffs. Some plants had retooling plans cancelled mid-process, leaving workers idle for extended periods.

¹ Pseudonyms have been used throughout this report, all identifying details have been altered.



For many, these explanations did little to soften the shock. *“About three years ago, they took the Equinox [Chevrolet SUV] to Mexico,”* recalled Kelsey, who had worked at CAMI for two decades. *“This is our third summer being laid off... We went back, built some [Bright Drop EVs], but sales weren’t high, and then we were laid off again.”*

John, another long-serving CAMI worker, echoed his frustration: *“We had huge promises for this [Bright Drop] vehicle. We went from working seven days a week to nothing. We’ve probably been off more than we’ve worked the last five years.”*

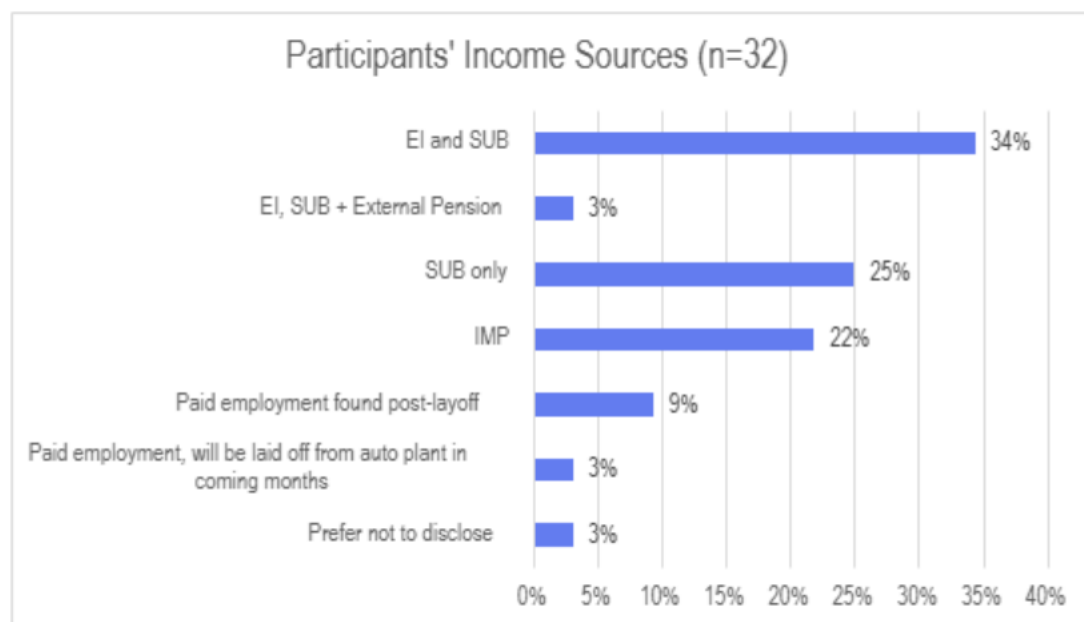
The unpredictability and lack of communication surrounding layoffs left many workers demoralized and uncertain about their futures.

Income Support and Financial Stability

Employment Insurance (EI) is a national program administered by the federal government that provides temporary income support to eligible workers based on the number of insurable weeks they have worked. SUB plans, negotiated through collective agreements, are employer-funded programs that “top up” EI payments without being deducted from them. The Income Maintenance Plan (IMP), also negotiated by Unifor, is paid directly by employers once EI and SUB benefits are exhausted, bridging the gap until workers are recalled or find new employment. Eligibility depended strongly on seniority—workers with decades of experience had extended benefits, while newer hires often went straight to IMP. Our research found widespread anxiety among participants that these benefits will expire long before plants resume operations—if they reopen at all.

Both federal and provincial governments have recently introduced workforce development measures in response. However, the scale of disruption requires far more ambitious interventions to prevent a social and economic crisis in Southwestern Ontario.

Eleven participants (34%) relied on Employment Insurance and Supplemental Unemployment Benefits (SUB), eight participants (25%) relied on SUB alone, and seven participants (22%) relied on Income Maintenance Plan (IMP).



While participants expressed gratitude for these programs, many described living “month to month.” Isabelle explained: *“We get SUB, which tops us up to 70% of our wage. Take-home pay is about \$4,000 a month—it’s enough to cover basics, but you can’t save or plan ahead.”*

Others, like David, faced harsher realities: *“I can get all the \$20-an-hour jobs I want, but I can’t survive on that. I was making \$42 an hour when I got laid off. I’d be going to the food bank.”*

Several participants also pointed to restrictive income rules. As Eric put it, *“We can’t get other work or we lose our SUB. That idleness—it’s not good. You take someone out of a workforce for two or three years, they’re not as sharp, not as employable. It hurts us in the long run.”*

Workers need clear and accurate information from government as to whether they can maintain their EI, SUB and IMP benefits while undergoing approved training. The lack of clarity about how these income supports interact with retraining programs—particularly Better Jobs Ontario (BJO)—creates confusion and anxiety for laid-off workers who are eager to upgrade their skills but cannot risk losing their benefits. Inconsistent guidance from various sources further compounds this uncertainty, leaving many to rely on informal advice from peers or union representatives. This absence of a transparent, authoritative policy framework effectively deters participation in retraining and prolongs periods of unemployment for workers who want to adapt to new opportunities in the evolving auto sector.

Layoff Experiences and Employer Communications

Workers consistently described how layoffs were handled as “cold,” “sudden,” and “disrespectful.” Many were informed mid-shift or by rumour rather than official notice.

David recounted: *“I was at Tim Hortons at lunch when another guy said, ‘Did you hear about the layoffs?’ We walked back in, and union reps were calling people into the fishbowl one by one. No warning, no meeting—just escorted out.”*

The manner of communication compounded emotional distress. As Christine described, *“They’re not telling you anything, so you’re like, was I terminated? What is going on here? Then you panic—do I have a job or not?”*

Such moments fostered anger, grief, and a deep loss of trust in employers. As David reflected, *“It felt cold and callous and disrespectful. I gave up a lot of family time for that place, and that’s how it ended.”*

These accounts reveal that layoffs were not only an economic disruption but also an emotional rupture that damaged long-standing bonds of loyalty and trust between workers and employers. Many participants said they would have accepted the closures more easily had the process been transparent, respectful, and coordinated. Instead, the absence of timely communication or transition planning left workers feeling devalued and discarded. This sense of betrayal shaped how they viewed both their employers and the institutions meant to support them during transition.

Retraining and Access Barriers

Most participants expressed interest in retraining—particularly in skilled trades, healthcare, or technical programs—but systemic barriers made transitions difficult.

Kelsey shared: *“I was looking at nursing or lab tech programs, but I don’t know if I’m going back to work in October, so it’s hard to commit.”*

This uncertainty underscores how unclear recall timelines discourage workers from enrolling in training. Many hesitate to invest time and money in new careers when there is a chance they may be recalled back to work. Financial uncertainty compounded hesitation. *“If you take training, you risk losing your benefits,”* John explained. *“I’d even work part-time if I could keep my SUB, just to feel productive.”*

John’s comment highlights the difficult trade-offs workers face between financial stability and skill development. For many, pursuing retraining can jeopardize access to Supplemental Unemployment Benefits (SUB), making it financially unviable to upskill during layoff periods.

POWER Centres – formerly known as Job Action Centres According to the Government of Ontario, POWER Centres (Protect Ontario Worker Employment Response), formerly known as Action Centres, — are temporary service locations that offer transition assistance for workers affected by mass layoffs. The new name was announced in August 2025 along with changes to the program. These centres provide individuals with wrap-around supports and the tools and resources needed to re-enter the workforce. These locations are typically set up by unions, employee or employer associations and municipalities.

Despite limited staffing, POWER Centres were widely praised as lifelines. Karl described them as *“a very valuable tool that a lot of members are using.”*

Isabelle said, *“The two girls running the Action Centre are fantastic. They’ve set up Smart Serve, mental health first aid, and Microsoft courses—all paid for. It’s helping us get back into job mode.”*

Still, as John noted, *“They’re helping more than 1,200 workers with five staff. They need more funding to really do what they could.”*

This speaks to the need to increase staffing at POWER centres. These centres have the ability to reach and support laid off workers in a powerful way but are clearly in need of increased funding.

Better Jobs Ontario

Many cited Better Jobs Ontario as too rigid or slow-moving. Isabelle’s story illustrates this frustration: *“Because it took too long to get approved, I missed September enrollment. Now I have to wait until January.”*

Her experience reflects a broader critique of the program’s administrative delays—approval processes that fail to align with post-secondary enrolment cycles, effectively preventing workers from accessing timely retraining opportunities. Interviews with staff who administer the Better Jobs Ontario (BJO) program revealed that completing an application can take up to three months, an excessively long timeframe that frequently results in missed intake periods and an extended period of unemployment. In addition, frontline staff at Employment Ontario (EO) agencies noted that they receive no formal recognition or credit for assisting clients with BJO applications, which discourages them from providing this support. Because this “invisible work” is not measured or rewarded, it competes with their primary performance requirement—helping clients secure immediate employment. As a result, there is little institutional incentive to guide clients through the lengthy and complex BJO application process, even when retraining may be the most appropriate pathway to re-employment.

A key insight from this project highlighted the importance of frontline staff’s ability to connect clients to outside supports that are not offered by the program. This underscores the need to have trained and qualified staff, such as those who work at an Employment Ontario provider, alongside staff at the POWER centre, to provide tailored support to laid off workers to find and connect them with opportunities in the community.

In August 2025 the length of training programs eligible for BJO funding, including living allowances was increased to 2 years, an improvement called for by some participants of this study.

Social, Economic, and Community Consequences

The social effects of layoffs were far-reaching. Worker’s spoke of lost structure, eroded confidence, and community decline.

John reflected: *“When you’re not working, it’s hard to get motivated. You feel like you’ve wasted another day, another week. It snowballs.”*

Some described deteriorating mental health and isolation. Isabelle shared how informal peer support became crucial: *“A few of us started meeting on Thursdays, just to vent. Some weeks it’s five people, some twenty. We check in on each other.”*

Economic impacts rippled through local communities. Chuck summarized grimly: *“In auto, we were always told, be prepared for the good, the bad and the ugly—right now, we’re sitting in the ugly.”*

The social and emotional fallout from these layoffs underscores the importance of coordinated, community-based responses. As workers lost structure and confidence, informal peer networks emerged to fill the void, offering connection where institutional support was slow to appear. These experiences highlight why resources such as POWER Centres and union-led initiatives play a vital role in sustaining both the practical and emotional resilience of displaced workers during extended periods of transition.

What Workers Need

Across interviews, workers emphasized that meaningful recovery depends on targeted, practical supports:

- Access to career retraining aligned with real labour market needs, not just short courses for survival jobs such as Smart Serve or forklift training programs.
- Income supports that don’t penalize education or part-time work.
- Mental health resources embedded in community programs.
- Stable funding for POWER Centres.
- Transparent communication from employers and government about plant futures and EV policies.
- Faster and more flexible access to Better Jobs Ontario funding.’

As David put it powerfully: *“At some point, we’ve got to stop talking about retraining people and actually do it. Nobody’s mortgage can wait while the government figures it out.”*

Conclusion

The findings highlight the precarious situation facing displaced workers in Ontario. Laid-off auto workers struggle with uncertainty, financial strain, retraining barriers, and loss of identity.

The evidence suggests that current systems—whether income supports, retraining programs, or equivalency tests—are not fully aligned with the realities of displaced workers. For many, these supports inadvertently prolong unemployment, heighten stress, and discount experiential knowledge. To better support transitions in a shifting economy, policies and programs must adapt to value workers’ lived experiences while reducing unnecessary barriers to re-employment.

Implications and Future Directions

Main Findings and Contributions

The findings highlight several critical insights. First, layoffs in the auto sector are not only disruptive in the short term but also prolonged by external factors such as U.S. tariffs on steel, aluminum, copper, autos, and medium and heavy trucks. These trade measures have delayed retooling projects, caused production to be repatriated within US borders and weakened investment confidence, intensifying uncertainty for workers and prolonging periods of unemployment. There is a distinct possibility that many auto workers will never work in the sector again, despite that being their first choice for future employment.

Second, while income supports such as Employment Insurance (EI), Supplemental Unemployment Benefits (SUB), and Income Maintenance Plans (IMP) provide temporary relief, they are often insufficient for prolonged layoffs. Workers face difficult choices between financial survival and pursuing retraining, compounded by a lack of clear, accessible information on how benefits interact with training eligibility.

Third, the study underscores the importance of community-based supports. Union operated POWER Centres emerged as a trusted resource, providing both practical information and peer to peer social support during uncertain times. However, their limited capacity restricts their ability to reach all affected workers.

More Tools for the Toolbox

Faced with job or seniority loss or a need to start over again if the industry or occupation they work in is in decline, many mid-career workers face downward mobility. Moving away for a new job can also be a difficult decision if it means uprooting home and family. Many mid-career workers suffer from a lack of self-confidence, discouragement, mistrust in the education system and doubts about the value of their work experience. This can be overcome through an awareness of these socio-emotional factors, individualized attention and a commitment to addressing equity.

To improve the mobility of mid-career workers, training programs should experiment to address barriers including through shorter training times, use of online and hybrid learning and targeting training to fill skill gaps.

Online learning is well-suited to the needs of mid-career workers, but only where digital literacy is addressed by integrating the facilitated use of learning technology into upskilling and reskilling programs.

Intervening early, before layoffs and displacements occur, offers the best opportunity to help mid-career workers upskill or reskill while avoiding layoff costs. This would take a substantial investment on a scale that can address the anticipated labour market disruptions ahead.

Workers cannot be forced into re-training programs however this study and recent national data suggest that workers tend to focus on getting their old jobs back. As noted in this study many workers see their job as part of their social and emotional well being. A Statistics Canada study by Morissette and Qiu (2021) found that only one in six displaced Canadian workers pursued

retraining, relocation, or self-employment within a year of job loss, and only one in five had done so five years later. The study suggests that job loss alone seldom prompts workers to adopt new adjustment strategies — largely due to cost, time, and confidence barriers — mirroring the hesitation described by participants in this study. The Morissette study looked at potential responses to COVID-19 related job losses, documented the use of four adjustment strategies by Canadian workers permanently laid off in 2009: moving to another region, enrolling in post-secondary education, signing up for a registered apprenticeship and becoming self-employed. Looking at adjustment patterns in the first and fifth years after job loss, the authors found that, overall, only a minority of displaced workers — at most one in five — adopted at least one of these strategies. What the study was not able to conclude was why the majority of laid off workers did not adopt these strategies. Some of the laid off workers were able to find new employment. Out of those who were not able to find new employment, about 42% adopted at least one of the adjustment strategies. More research is needed to explore the reasoning as to why laid off workers, especially those who were not successful in locating new employment, did not adopt one of the strategies mentioned, and what other strategies they did adopt, if

More Pro-active Training Programs

A look at Alberta's workforce response to its coal transition reveals a pro-active tailor made approach. Between 2018 and 2024, Alberta managed the closure of coal plants and mines affecting 2,500–3,000 jobs. Those jobs were stable until closure, and some facilities converted to natural gas, mitigating job loss. In contrast, the Ontario auto sector is accustomed to cyclical layoffs due to model re-tooling, downturns, and strikes. This "normal" volatility risks masking what may well turn out to be a structural and permanent contraction of employment. While some recent improvements were made to Ontario's Better Jobs Ontario program, more ambition is needed.

Lay-off Aversion Legislation

Employers have a built-in bias against providing portable credentials for their production workers, as it tends to drive up compensation as those workers change employers for better wages and benefits.

In the United States, Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification (WARN) laws require employers to provide advance notice of plant closures or mass layoffs, giving governments time to put in place appropriate workforce development programs, allow workers time to financially prepare, seek retraining and gain credentials for prior knowledge. On the books for decades in the US, and in much need of overhaul including longer lead time, and increased penalties for non compliance.

In Canada no equivalent federal or provincial legislation exists, leaving Ontario workers vulnerable to abrupt job loss with little opportunity to plan for transition, access timely supports or gain credentials for their production skills.

The Future Skills Centre has funded the Canadian Skills Training and Employment Coalition (CSTEC) to do further research into what such legislation could be enacted in an earlier study, and another study is forthcoming.

Wage Insurance

Wage insurance provides additional income to workers who find new employment at lower wages, bridging the gap between their previous and current earnings. A 2024 study by Hyman, Kovak, and Leive saw wage insurance eligibility boosted employment rates by 8 to 17 percentage points in the two years following displacement, although the effect faded after four years, eligible workers saw a 10% increase in their pre-displacement earnings, amounting to over \$18,000, or a 26% increase, over four years, wage insurance led to shorter unemployment spells, and the program was self-financing, with increased tax receipts and reduced unemployment insurance payments fully offsetting its costs.

Skilled Trades are not the Answer for Everyone

The province put much emphasis on training for the skilled trades, especially construction trades. But construction is not for everyone. In 2019 the Labour Education Centre conducted basic construction trades training in conjunction with Unifor Local 222 under the Provinces' Rapid Skills program, when the GM plant in Oshawa was closed. Workers were attracted to the high wages in construction similar to the assembly plants, but were discouraged by having to start as a lower wage first year apprentice and having to work outdoors in all weather conditions. The Province should consider pathways for experienced production workers to be granted credit in some skilled trades that would allow them a shorter apprentice period, or wage subsidy program.

Areas for Further Research

Future studies should:

- Track workers longitudinally to examine how they navigate prolonged layoffs and eventual re-employment.
- Investigate the compounded effects of trade policies, automation, and climate policy on workforce transitions.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of POWER Centres at scale, identifying strategies for capacity-building and replication.

Recommendations

1. No Transition Funding without a Workforce Development Plan

Require all public auto sector funding to be fully transparent and contingent upon agreement by a joint workplace union-management workforce development committee with operational funding.

2. Governance and Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration

As envisioned by the Canada Sustainable Jobs Act (2024) create a sector-wide Auto Sectoral Transition Council involving employers, unions, Employment Ontario agencies and System Service Managers, provincial and federal governments, municipalities, post-secondary institutions and First Nations to coordinate labour market planning, ensure transparency, and align programs across ministries and levels of governments to worker and community needs.

3. Industrial and Economic Strategy

Implement a coordinated industrial strategy that protects existing auto plants, incentivizes domestic EV and battery production, promotes local procurement, supports community redevelopment, and rewards consumers for purchasing Ontario-built EVs.

4. Lay-off Aversion Legislation

Using American Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification (WARN) legislation as a starting point, establish a lay-off aversion strategy backed by legislation. Require sufficient advance notice of lay-offs to provide workforce adjustment program in the workplace prior to closure, allow for workers to be certified for their industrial skills, and to mandate consistent, transparent communication from employers during retooling or transition periods.

5. POWER Centre and Employment Ontario Integration

Increase POWER Centre staffing and embed Employment Ontario staff on-site as needed to provide employment counseling and services, retraining navigation and actual training. Centres could also be used to deliver wrap-around supports such as mental health services, financial counselling, and referrals to other services.

6. Education and Training Reform

Create a system of micro credentials to recognize industrial and workplace skills to promote worker mobility, as part of a lay-off aversion strategy. Create programs for workplace and personal digital skills. Diversify training pathways by expanding Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) credentials for industrial skills, allow for advanced placement in trades apprentice programs.

7. Ensure Timely and Equitable Access to Better Jobs Ontario Supports

Improve the Better Jobs Ontario program by publicizing the program, streamlining approvals, aligning timelines with school intakes, simplifying applications, and incentivizing Employment Ontario staff to proactively support BJO applicants.

8. Income Security and Retirement Pathways

Pilot wage-insurance retraining subsidies in high impact areas such as Brampton and Ingersoll to maintain income stability and reduce social stress during layoffs and retraining. Expand early-retirement options while protecting pensions and benefits to take older workers out of the workforce.

9. Strengthening Worker Support Infrastructure

Remove barriers to training through childcare, transportation, and relocation supports, and expand access to adult education—particularly for newcomers and refugees.

10. Research and Evaluation

Invest in ongoing research and pilot programs to track worker outcomes, evaluate transition supports, and ensure data-driven, transparent scaling of successful models province-wide.

ANNEX 1: Interview Guide – Laid-Off Auto Workers

Interview 1 - Questions for Laid Off Auto Workers

Collection of Demographic Information

Participant ID: _____

A. [Full](#) Name:

B. Preferred Pseudo name for reporting purposes:

C. What city are you currently living in?

D. Education Level:[some high school, completed high school, some college, completed college, some university, completed university, some post-graduate studies, completed post-graduate studies]

Probe: (if completed up to high school) Did you complete 30 high school credits or did you obtain the GED or CAEC?

Probe: (if completed some high school) What grade in high school did you complete? [9, 10, 11]

Probe: What is the highest level English course you completed in high school?

Probe: What is the highest level math course you completed in high school?

Probe: What is the highest level physics course you completed in high school?

Probe: What is the highest level chemistry course you completed in high school?

E. Specific age or age range: [18-24; 25-34; 35-44; 45-54; 55-64; 65+]

F. How did you hear about this project?

G. Gender Identification: [male, female, transgender, non-binary (gender falls outside the male/female gender), genderfluid (no fixed gender, expression varies depending on how they feel at the moment), two-spirit, agender (do not identify with any gender), pangender (experiencing all genders), other: please specify, [prefer not to disclose](#)]

H. Sexual Orientation: [heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, pansexual, polysexual, asexual, other: please specify, [prefer not to disclose](#)]

I. Race: [Black, white/caucasian, Asian, Native/Indigenous, Bi-Racial, Multi-Racial, other: please specify]

J. Citizenship Status: [Canadian Citizen, Permanent Resident, Convention Refugee, Refugee Claimant, other: please specify]

K. Where were you born?

a. (If born outside of Canada) What year did you move to Canada?

L. Current Income Support: [paid employment, Employment Insurance (EI), Ontario Works (OW), ODSP, no income, other: please specify]

a. If receiving subsidy: how much are you receiving monthly by subsidy?

M. Last position held in the auto industry:

N. Number of positions held in the auto industry altogether:

O. Length of time employed in the auto industry altogether:

P. Did you hold a Management role? (y/n):

1. **Describe Your Job:**

A. Can you tell me about your last job in the auto industry (before you were laid off)?

Probe: Where did you work?

Probe: What position did you hold?

Probe: How long did you work at that job?

Probe: What were your main duties?

Probe: Were you a member of a union? (if yes) Which one? Steel Workers, Unifor, Liuna, Cope?

Probe: Did your job include benefits?

Probe: Were you paid a salary or by the hour?

A. **Job Layoff:**

A. Tell me a bit about how and why your job came to an end.

B. When were you laid off?

C. What feelings have arisen for you as a result of being laid off?

D. Because of your work situation, has your life changed in other ways (e.g. home, leisure, social connections, family, mental health)

2. **Supports:**

A. Did the employer and/or the union (if one was in place) provide any support to workers who were laid off, such as financial support, job training, education, or bridging benefits?

(if yes) What type of support was provided?

(if yes) Was this support helpful?

B. Did you access any supports on your own, such as financial support, job training, education, or bridging benefits?

(if yes) What type of supports did you access?

(if yes) Was this support helpful?

3. **Current Employment Status:**

A. Were you able to find another job after being laid off?

(if yes) What type of job are you doing now?

(if yes) Are you currently in the process of completing an apprenticeship?

(if yes) Is your job comparable to the job you had before in terms of pay, benefits and job satisfaction?

(if no and wants to be employed) What obstacles are you facing in trying to find another job?

(if no and wants to be employed) What assistance could you use in trying to find another job?

(if no and wants to be employed) Are you interested in remaining employed in the automotive sector with the shift to EVs?

4. Just Transition Programs:

A. What programs or support from the government do you think would have been (or would be) helpful to you when you were laid off?

Probe: Were you offered any support with finding a new job through an employment support agency? If yes, what support did they offer? If yes, were you satisfied with the support you received? If no, would this have been helpful to you?

Probe: Were you offered a re-training grant to complete high school? Was this (Would this have been) helpful to you?

Probe: Were you offered a re-training grant to attend post secondary education, such as college, university, or an apprenticeship for the trades? Was this (Would this have been) helpful to you?

Probe: Were you offered any bridging benefits so you could take early retirement? Was this (Would this have been) helpful to you?

Probe: Were you willing to move to find another job?

(If yes), how far are you willing to move for work?

(If yes), would you require support to make the move?

(if yes), were you given any support with making the move? If not, what support would have been helpful to you?

Probe: Did you have any childcare issues that you needed help with when you were laid off?

(if yes) What support did you receive with childcare? What support would have been helpful to you?

Probe: Were you offered any counseling services for mental health and/or family violence (if applicable)?

Probe: Were you offered any financial support to cover your basic needs for food and shelter, such as Employment Insurance (EI), Ontario Works (OW) and/or ODSP?(If yes), did you find the amount you were given was sufficient to cover all costs for basic needs?

B. (If still working in the auto industry or wants to be working in the auto industry) Did you (Do you) feel well-equipped for the automotive shift into EV production? Why or why not?

C. What skills, if any, do you (did you) feel that you must (needed to) improve in order to work in the changing automotive sector? Please describe.

5. **Impact of Tariffs:**

A. (if employed) What impact, if any, do you believe the U.S. tariffs are having on your employment?

B. (if unemployed) What impact, if any, do you believe the U.S. tariffs are having on your ability to find employment?

C. (if retired) What impact, if any, do you believe the U.S. tariffs are having on your retirement?

6. **Additional Comments:**

1. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience that I have not asked about?

Annex 2: Glossary of Terms:

Action Centres:

Now known as POWER Centres, temporary service locations that offer transition assistance for workers affected by mass layoffs. These centres provide individuals with wrap-around supports and the tools and resources needed to re-enter the workforce. These locations are typically set up by unions, employee or employer associations and municipalities.

Auto Pact (1965):

A trade agreement between Canada and the United States that created a tariff-free market for automobiles and parts, guaranteeing production levels in Canada and forming the foundation of the country's auto industry.

Better Jobs Ontario (BJO):

A provincial program that provides financial support to unemployed or underemployed workers for skills training in in-demand occupations.

BOLD (Better Outcomes for Laid-Off and Displaced Workers):

A pilot project led by the Canadian Skills Training and Employment Coalition (CSTEC) that tested a proactive, service-intensive "layoff aversion" model designed to connect displaced workers with short-term, in-demand training and rapid re-employment opportunities.

Canadian Adult Education Credential (CAEC):

A standardized high school equivalency test introduced in Ontario in 2024 to replace the GED. It assesses adult learners in math, reading, writing, science, and social studies.

Canada–United States–Mexico Agreement (CUSMA):

The 2020 trade agreement that replaced NAFTA, setting updated rules for trade and investment across North America, including auto sector requirements for regional content.

Employment Ontario (EO):

The Ontario government's employment and training network, which offers job search help, career counselling, and access to training and education programs.

Electric Vehicles (EVs):

Vehicles powered entirely or partly by electric batteries, rather than by internal combustion engines running on gasoline or diesel.

Ford:

One of the world's largest automotive companies, headquartered in the United States, with long-standing vehicle assembly and manufacturing operations in Ontario.

General Educational Development (GED):

A high school equivalency test previously offered in Ontario until 2024, when it was replaced by the CAEC.

GM (General Motors):

A global automobile manufacturer based in the United States, producing vehicles and components through facilities such as GM CAMI and GM Oshawa in Ontario.

Income Maintenance Plan (IMP):

An arrangement, often negotiated through collective agreements, that provides financial top-ups or support to workers facing layoffs or reduced hours.

Internal Combustion Engines (ICE):

Engines powered by burning fuel (gasoline or diesel) inside cylinders to create energy for vehicles.

Just Transition:

A framework for ensuring that workers and communities affected by economic change, such as the shift to clean energy, are supported through retraining, income security, and new job opportunities.

North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA):

A trade agreement between Canada, the United States, and Mexico in effect from 1994 to 2020, later replaced by CUSMA.

POWER Centres:

Ontario's rebranded Action Centres temporary service locations that offer transition assistance for workers affected by mass layoffs. These centres will provide individuals with wrap-around supports and the tools and resources needed to re-enter the workforce. These locations are typically set up by unions, employee or employer associations and municipalities. These centres support laid-off workers with services such as retraining navigation, job search assistance, financial advice, and emotional support.

Re-tooling:

The process of upgrading or modifying factory equipment and processes to produce new products, such as shifting from ICE vehicles to EVs.

Stellantis:

A multinational automotive manufacturer formed in 2021 through the merger of Fiat Chrysler Automobiles and Peugeot S.A. (PSA Group), operating several assembly plants in Canada.

Supplemental Unemployment Benefit (SUB):

Employer-provided top-up payments that supplement Employment Insurance benefits to help maintain a worker's income during layoffs.

Tariffs:

Taxes or duties imposed on imported goods to protect domestic industries or respond to trade disputes.

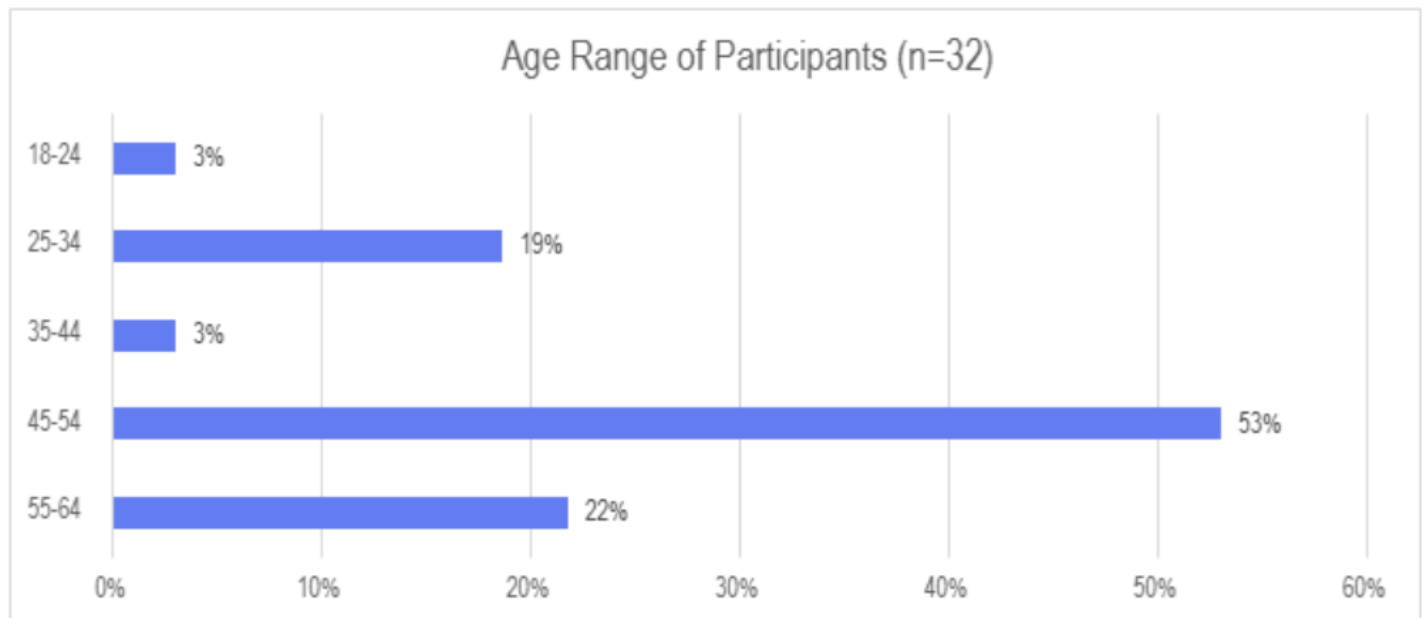
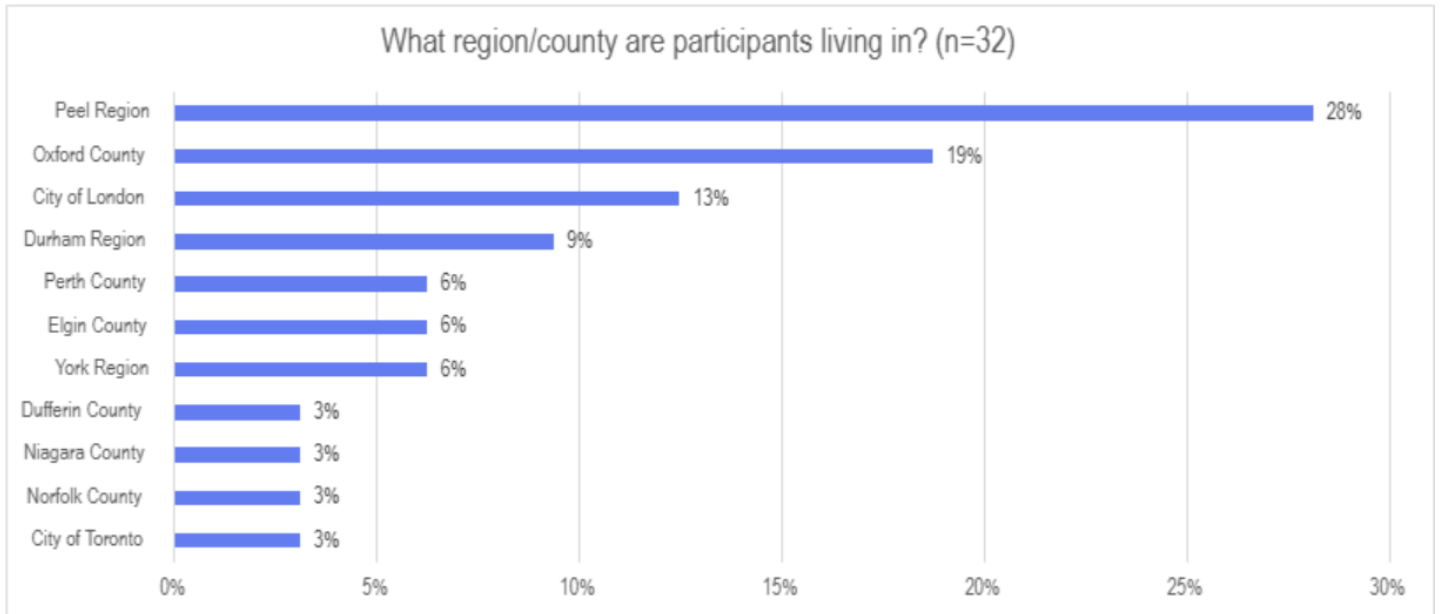
Unifor:

Canada's largest private-sector union, representing over 300,000 workers across multiple industries, including automotive manufacturing, auto parts production, telecommunications, and transportation.

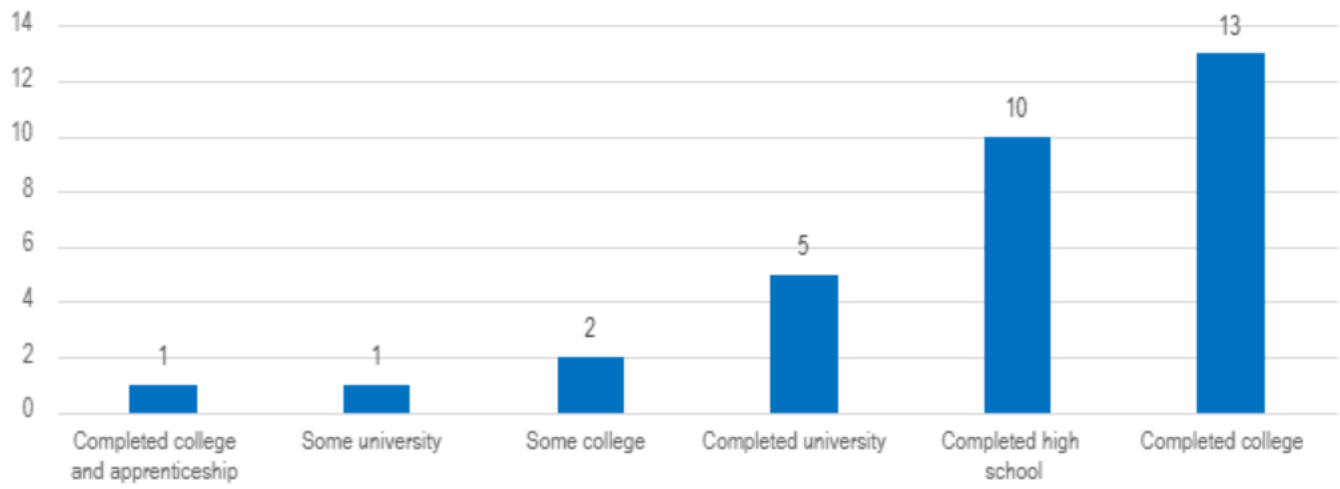
Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification (WARN):

An American labour law enacted in 1988. The federal WARN Act requires employers with 100 or more employees to provide at least 60 days' advance written notice before; a plant closing, or mass layoff affecting a significant number of workers. The purpose of the WARN Act is to give employees, their families, and communities time to prepare for the loss of employment—by seeking alternative work, retraining opportunities, or income supports.

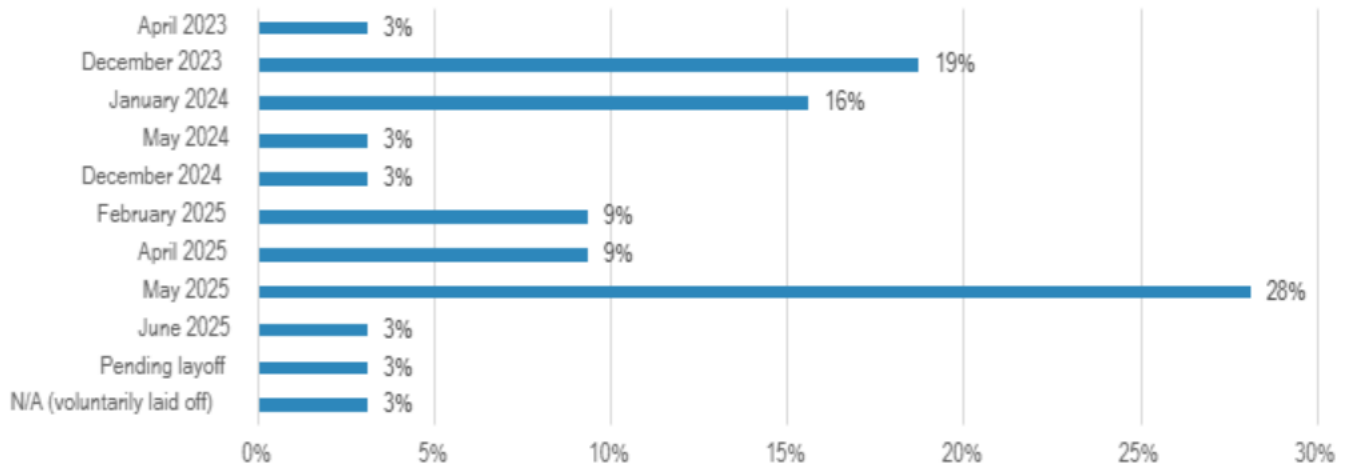
Annex 3: Demographic Visualizations

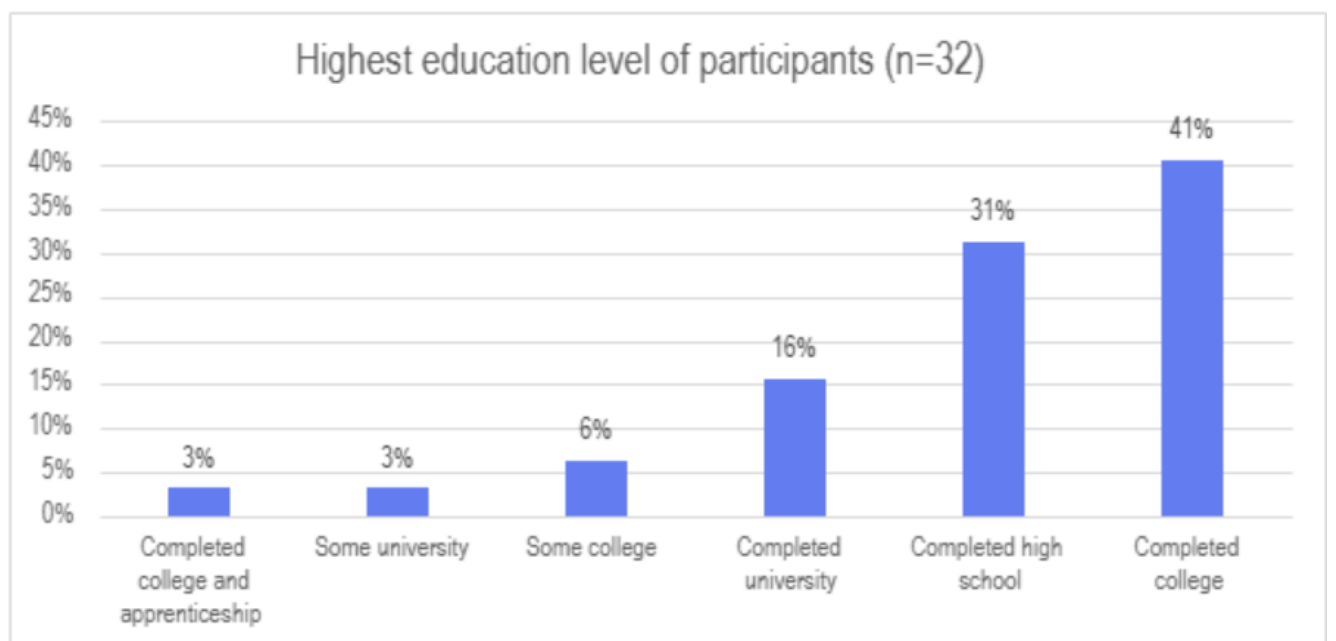
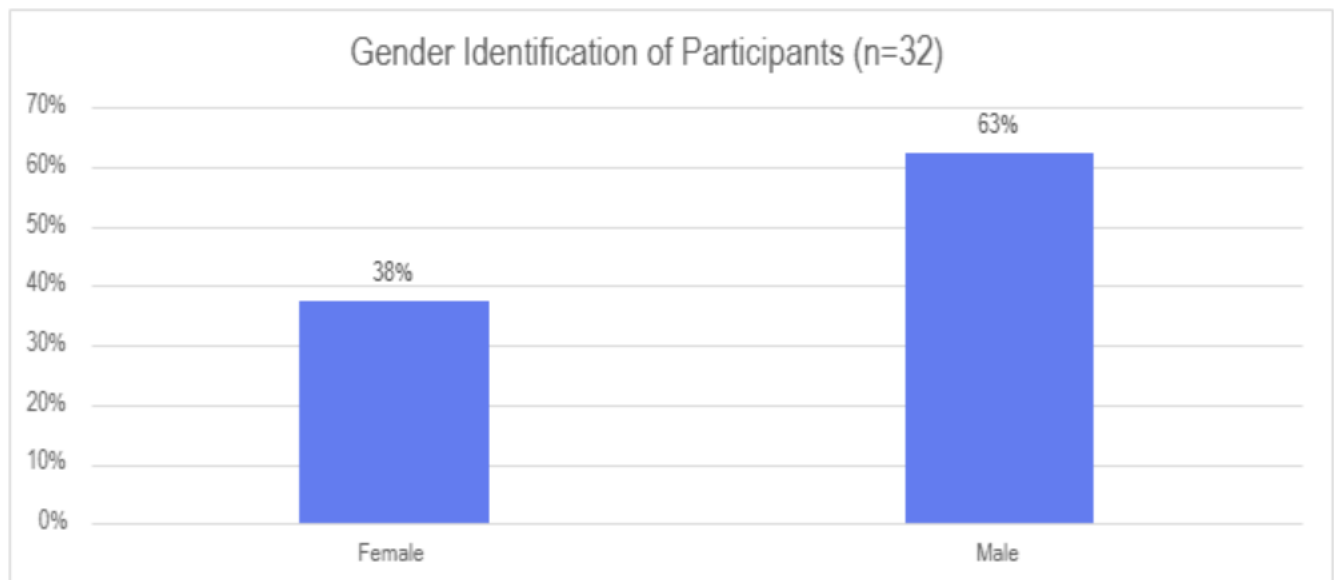


Highest education level of participants (n=32)

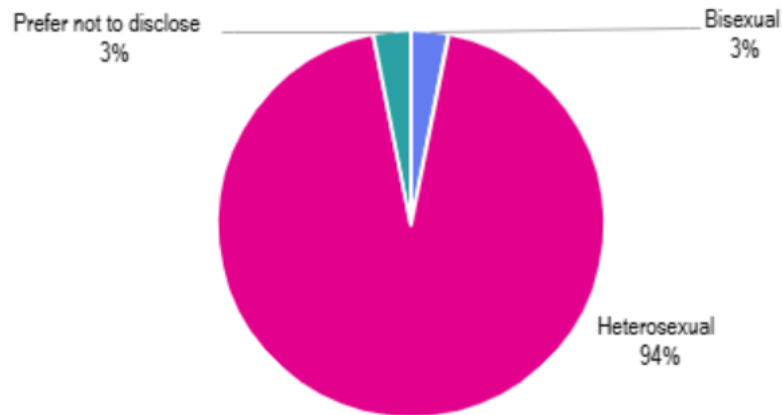


When were participants laid off? (n=32)

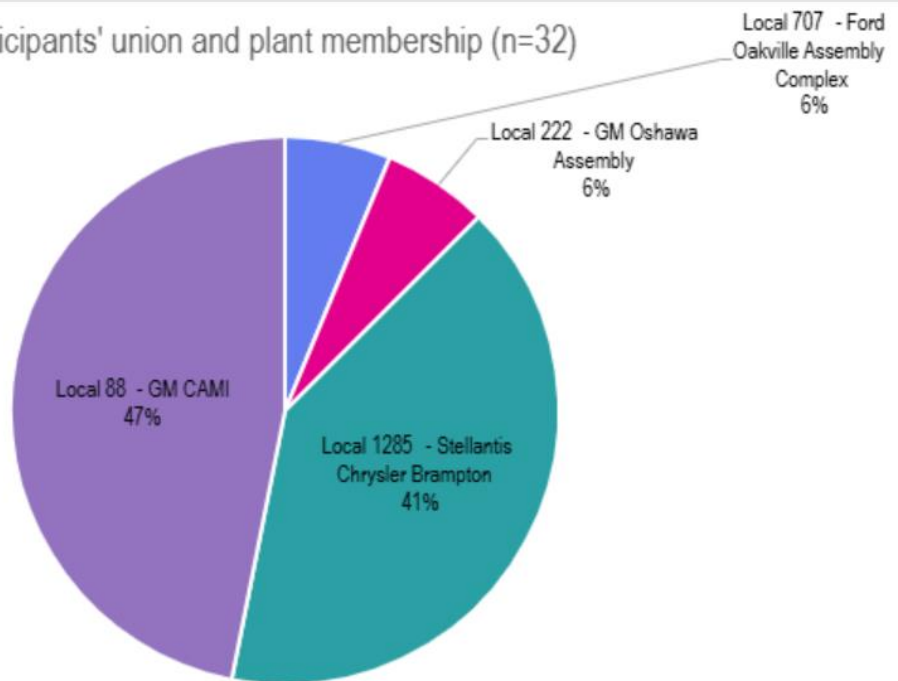


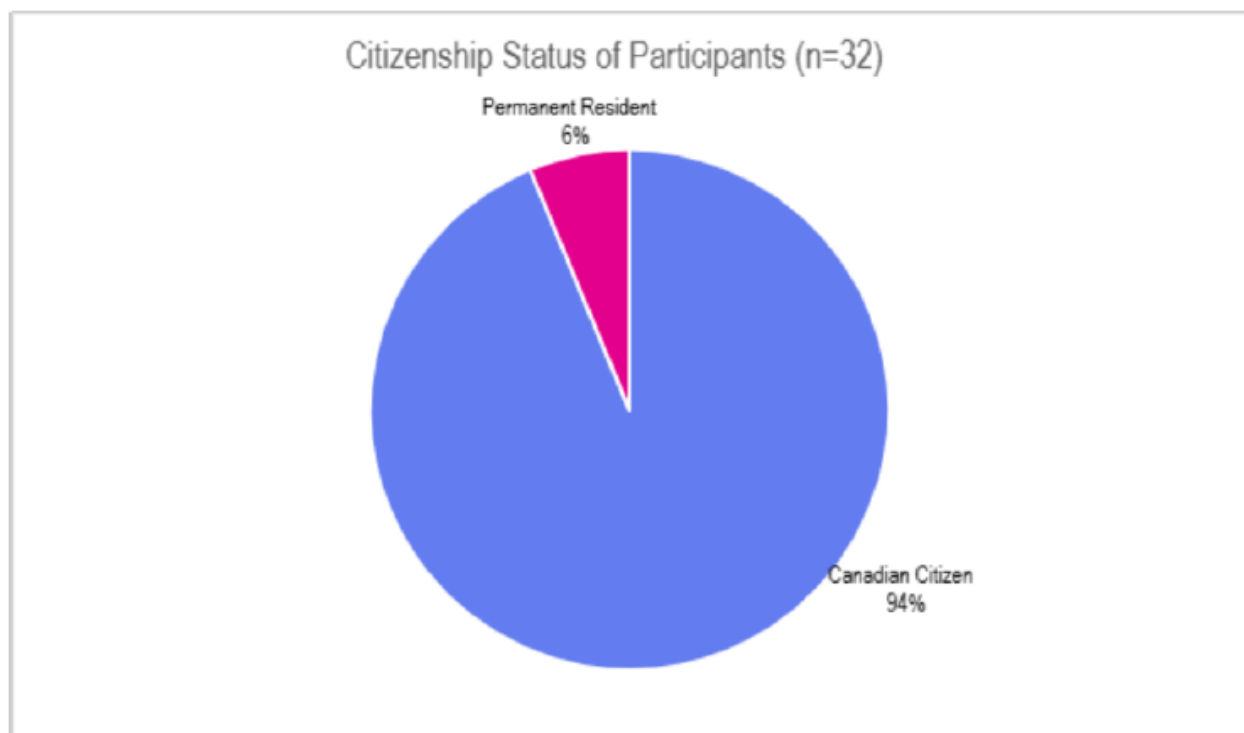
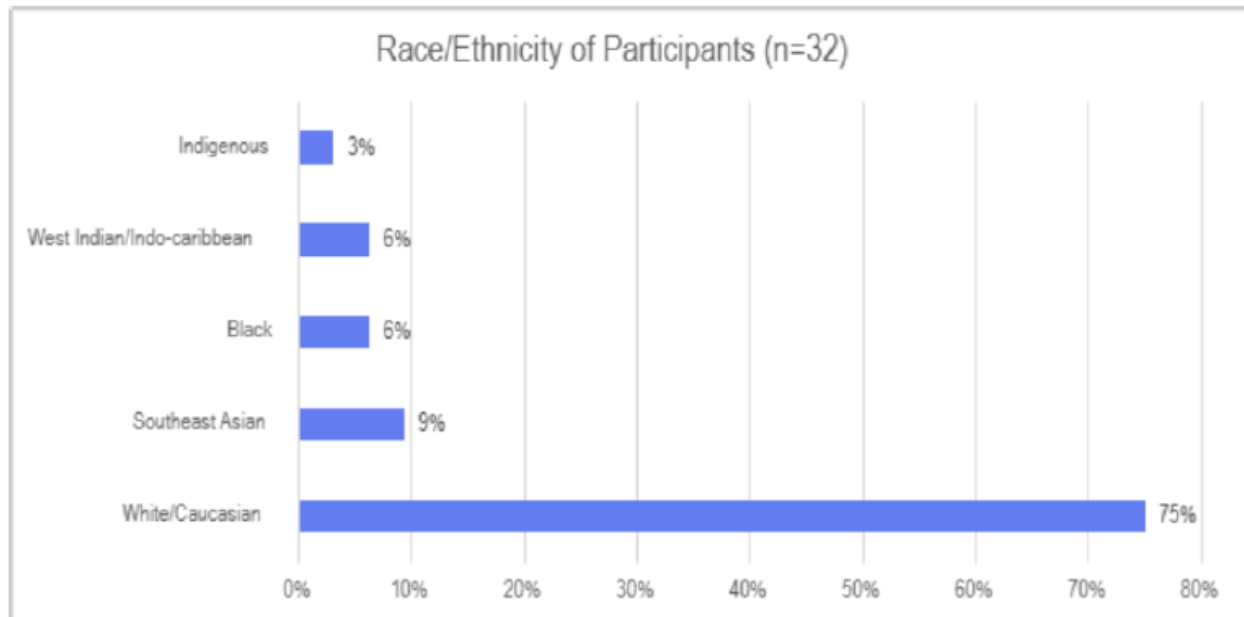


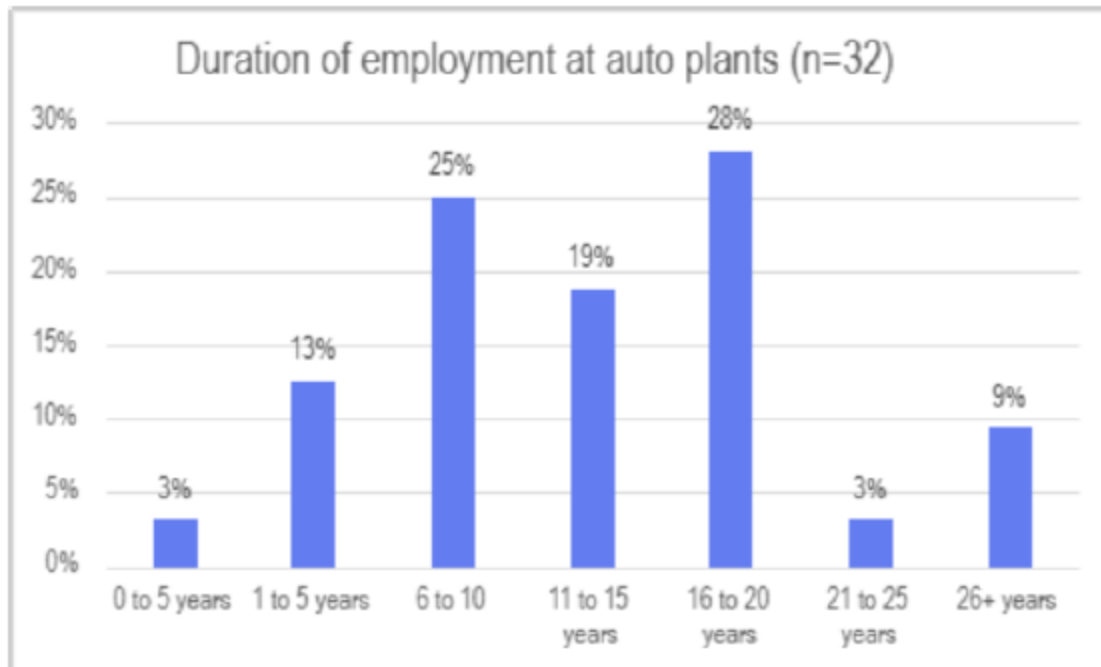
Sexual Orientation of Participants (n=32)



Participants' union and plant membership (n=32)







Annex 4: Recruitment Flyer

Funded by the
Government of Canada's
Future Skills Program

Canada

ARE YOU A LAID-OFF AUTO WORKER?

CONSIDER ENROLLING IN A
RESEARCH STUDY!

WE WANT TO SPEAK
TO YOU TO...

- ✓ Hear from those **directly impacted by mass layoffs** in the auto industry
- ✓ Discover your **training/program needs**
- ✓ Help us make **informed policy recommendations**

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA:

- ✓ Must have worked in the automotive industry in Ontario and been laid off due to the **shift to EV production**

\$100
COMPENSATION
PROVIDED

**DEADLINE TO
CONTACT:**
AUGUST 11, 2025

SCAN THE QR CODE TO HAVE YOUR VOICE HEARD!



Future
Skills
Centre

Centre des
Compétences
futures

Labour
Education
Centre

**WORKING
GREEN 2050**

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Annex 6: Acknowledgements

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Rhonda extends her sincere gratitude to Karin Meinzer at PTP for sharing valuable information about CAEC preparation and testing, which deepened our understanding of the requirements involved in completing the testing. Karin demonstrated exceptional enthusiasm and commitment to our research by offering direct support to participants preparing for the test, including the possibility of hosting classes in a convenient location. Her expertise and dedication were instrumental in helping us launch this research and gave us the confidence to move forward.

Steve gratefully acknowledges the guidance and oversight provided by Veritas, whose expertise in research governance and quality assurance strengthened the integrity and credibility of this project. Their thoughtful feedback, ethical guidance, and commitment to maintaining rigorous research standards ensured that the study was conducted with professionalism and care from inception to completion.

Annex 7: Researcher Biographies

Iris Rofman

Iris Rofman is a Researcher and Interviewer with a strong interest in using data and analysis to inform social policy and improve service delivery. With an MSW focused on macro practice and research, she brings a systems-level perspective to her work. Her frontline experiences in the nonprofit sector - including roles as a Settlement Counsellor, Employment Counsellor, and Client Support Worker - have deepened her understanding of the structural challenges facing communities. Over more than four years at LEC, she developed a commitment to evidence-based approaches that center client experience.

Rhonda Bromley

Rhonda Bromley is the Project Coordinator for the Working Green 2050 department at the Labour Education Centre, a role she has held since May 2025. She led the research project *“Just Transition for Production Workers in the Shift to Electric Vehicles.”* With over 25 years as a Social Worker (MSW), Rhonda has worked in community mental health, employment supports, child protection, and developmental services, always focused on helping people navigate complex systems and build resilience. For the past six years, she has supported unemployed youth entering construction trades and developed the WrapAround program, which provided holistic support for people on social assistance.

Steve Shallhorn

Steve is Managing Director of the Working Green 2050 program of the Labour Education Centre, focussing on Just Transition for workers who lose their jobs with the closure of high carbon emitting plants, or changes in technology. This includes a study of programs when coal plants were closed in Canada and Australia; and recently worked with Ontario auto workers displaced by emerging electric vehicle production.

From 2011 to September 2022 Steve was the Executive Director of the Labour Education Centre.

From 2012-2016 Steve was concurrently the founding Director of the Toronto Community Benefits Network (TCBN), a network of labour and community groups working to ensure that construction training and jobs building Toronto’s Light Rail Transit system are available to equity seeking groups.