

GM Oshawa job cuts show real economy hurting under Stephen Harper

By Thomas Walkom

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When Stephen Harper's Conservatives talk about protecting the economy, they are speaking of an abstraction.

They override the right to strike of rail and airline workers in order to further this abstraction. They run roughshod over the environment in its name.

But the real economy is not an abstraction. It is people's jobs and wages. It is our livelihood. It is how we get by.

And this real economy is not doing well.

The real economy includes the 2,000 people set to lose their jobs in Oshawa by June 2013, thanks to cutbacks just announced by General Motors.

That would be the General Motors, incidentally, which Canada's federal government (and Ontario's provincial government) helped to save from bankruptcy in 2009.

We had to bail out the auto giant, we were told then, in order to protect the economy.

And certainly government did protect the multinational company, which — thanks in part to new investments in China — is now going great guns.

But did it protect the thousands inside and outside GM whose jobs depend on the Oshawa assembly plants? It seems not.

Worldwide, the real economy of jobs and wages is in deep trouble. Europe's ham-fisted handling of the eurozone debt crisis has thrown millions out of work in Spain, Portugal, Ireland, Italy and Greece. Britain's ill-advised government austerity scheme has thrown more out of work there.

Faced with slowing growth and consequent job losses, China is engaged once again in a game of currency devaluation, in a bid to boost its exports.

These events in far-away places have ricochet effects around the world. On Friday, the U.S. announced that its already too-high unemployment rate has started to inch up again.

The latest snapshot from Statistics Canada is not cheering either. Inflation-adjusted growth in this country stalled in the first three months of 2012.

In part, the agency says, that's because governments have dramatically cut back their spending.

In part it's because ordinary people, fearful of their jobs, are curbing their expenses. And that, in turn, affects the jobs of others.

So what exactly is the Conservative government protecting? Or more precisely, whom is it protecting?

It has certainly protected GM. At the time of the auto bailout, we were told the company needed time to switch away from gas-guzzling pick-ups in order to focus on energy-efficient vehicles.

Three years later, the gas-guzzlers are still with us. But the North American workers that build them are gradually disappearing.

The Harper Conservatives are also protecting those companies, from Royal Dutch Shell on down, engaged in mining the Alberta oilsands. That is this government's economic strategy. That is why it has declared war on the environmental movement.

Insofar as Shell and other oil companies employ workers, the government is also protecting Canadian jobs. But jobs are a side effect. If the petroleum industry could figure out a way to mine the tar sands entirely with robot labour — and with all inputs provided by cheap offshore manufacturers — this government would be fine with that as well.

Just as it is fine with General Motors' latest job cuts.

To this government, the only thing that matters is something called the economy. Those real people who make up this economy are irrelevant. If they are out of work, the fault is theirs. They should accept lower wages.

They certainly can't expect to have both an unspoiled environment and jobs. Chinese workers don't enjoy luxuries such as health and safety standards. Why should Canadians? The "economy" doesn't permit such things.