

American Axle workers in Detroit determined to resist sellout

By a reporting team
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A WSWS reporting team visited the American Axle picket line in Detroit on April 4. Tensions were high due to the protracted character of the strike and mounting threats by management. A short while earlier American Axle had placed ads in local newspapers in a move seen as the first step to bringing in strikebreakers. This follows the well-publicized threat by American Axle CEO Richard Dauch to send jobs overseas if workers continue their resistance to concessions.

American Axle strikers are getting no information from the local or the UAW International about the status of the strike, leading to widespread speculation that the union is preparing a sellout. This feeling has been reinforced by reports that out-of-town local UAW leaders are being called to Detroit this weekend for meetings.

Robin, an American Axle striker with 12 years seniority, told the WSWS that she and her coworkers had heard nothing from the UAW since the beginning of the strike "If this strike is so important to the union, she said, "why aren't they giving us any attention?"

"If the UAW allows a profitable company to drop existing wages that is going to have an impact on Ford, GM and Chrysler," Robin added. "What do they think will really happen if they bargain to lower all these jobs to \$18 or \$14 an hour? Do you think people are going to still pay union dues?"

A worker with 14 years at the Detroit plant said, "American Axle says it has given the information the union requested. What I have said is that figures don't lie, but liars figure. Whatever information Dauch and the other executives have come up with is going to be used to justify wage cuts so the guys in that Ivory Tower can keep living it up. Is Dauch going to give up his Marco Island home in Florida and move to Mexico if he ships our jobs there?"

"The unions are dying. They are controlled by a bureaucracy. They get corporate payoffs like the VEBA [the multi-billion dollar Voluntary Employees' Beneficiary Association trust fund for retiree health benefits]. I wonder whose brother-in-law is going to control that fund."

An older American Axle worker expressed similar skepticism in the UAW leadership, commenting, "I believe we will end up getting the same as Delphi after walking for six weeks; some kind of buy-down. How can the UAW ask

us to take a cut in pay with a profitable business?"

Despite the mounting hardships faced by strikers, the WSWS encountered a mood of angry determination on the picket line. Bolstering workers determination to stand up to the threats issued by American Axle is the specter of a deteriorating economy amidst the growth of monstrous social inequality in America.

"What is happening now is the backdoor to a depression," Robin said. "Instead of the bottom falling out, they are taking it a little at a time. At \$14 an hour I would be better off at McDonald's. At least they have better benefits."

Commenting on the implicit threat by American Axle to bring in strikebreakers, she remarked, "It would be ugly."

Annette, another striker, told the WSWS, "If Dauch wants to cut it seems like he should start with himself. We have homes, families, kids in college. All the money he has he has made off of us."

Another striker said, "With \$40 million a year you pay a CEO, I would rather pay a brain surgeon, someone who saves lives. Why would you want to keep people in management that are taking companies into bankruptcy? You look at things like Enron, it is disgusting."

Another remarked, "If they succeed in pushing through these concessions they are going to do it to all workers. The wealthy don't pay taxes. We're going back to the Middle Ages with the monarchs up on the hill and the peasants fighting each other over a chicken. That eventually led to a revolution."

Strikers seem generally convinced that the fate of other workers in the auto industry is linked to their struggle. "I believe GM has a hand in this," said Annette. "They were going to have layoffs anyway. Once GM is ready to go back to work they will call Dauch and come back with a contract. If we go for it (concessions), the contract for GM, Chrysler and Ford will be a chain reaction; it will be the same contract we got."

Another worker agreed, "I think GM was somewhat behind this. They wanted to deplete their inventory, but they didn't think we would hang on this long. Trucks weren't selling, so they didn't panic at first. Now that their inventory in the top-selling Chevy Malibu is down, they are starting to panic."

"At the Big Three, they said they wouldn't cut their money (current employees), but now they are losing their jobs. When we get our pay cut, GM is going to tell Dauch to cut the price of his axles in half."