

Police arrest auto workers on American Axle picket line in Detroit

By **Tim Tower**
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Auto workers on strike at American Axle and Manufacturing (AAM) in Detroit and New York are facing a sharp escalation of attacks in their struggle to prevent the company from carrying through a brutal two-thirds reduction in their wages and benefits. The 3,650 AAM workers organized in the United Auto Workers union walked out more than two weeks ago.

On Friday morning, March 14, the company executed what appeared to be a carefully orchestrated effort at the company's main production facility in Detroit, involving local police and news media to provoke a confrontation and force an end to the strike.

Approximately a dozen squad cars and twice as many uniformed officers accompanied by vans and plain-clothes cops were mobilized when the company moved large semi-trailers through the St. Aubin Street gate of the huge American Axle complex. Three picketers were arrested, charged with disorderly conduct, handcuffed and taken away in police vans.

Soon after the arrests, reporters from the World Socialist Web Site visited the picket lines and interviewed strikers. A witness to the incident reported that one of the truck drivers got out of his vehicle and approached the pickets in an apparent deliberate effort to cause a provocation.

The police then escorted the scab back to his truck while other officers arrested and handcuffed three of the pickets. As the witness reported, "They didn't take him to jail, but they took three of our guys to jail that were just standing in the way. Now what's up with that?" he asked. "To me, that's illegal."

Local media outlets responded with breaking-news reports of violence and arrests on the picket lines and video images of strikers being hauled away in handcuffs. As an example, in a story headlined "Strikers Handcuffed During Scuffle," the web site for Channel 4, the local NBC affiliate, wrote, "Detroit police were called to the St. Aubin strike location Friday morning to control a situation that turned violent."

According to eyewitnesses, the only violence was carried out by a lone scab truck driver supported by a large number of police. The provocative character of the incident and the inflated and inflammatory response to it in the local media are aimed at intimidating the strikers in preparation for the UAW's move to end the strike.

As the union has become increasingly integrated into the financial and management structure of the corporations where its members work, it has become common practice for the UAW to move to shut down a strike at the very moment when the workers' struggle begins to exercise its greatest economic impact. Such is the current danger at American Axle.

General Motors, AAM's principal client receiving 80 percent of parts produced by company, has a large stake in the current conflict.

When its plants began to shut down because of parts shortages, the auto giant gave its full support to AAM's decision to inflict a decisive defeat on its workers. Presumably, short-term losses were seen as a necessary sacrifice to insure the extension of the auto industry pattern of brutal cuts in wages and benefits.

However, the published reports this week of a statement by GM Chairman Rick Wagoner that the strike will hurt GM's first-quarter financial results is a sign that pressure is building in corporate boardrooms to bring the strike to a speedy end. Parts shortages from the strike have forced GM to close all or part of 28 plants, affecting more than 37,000 hourly workers.

In line with these demands, the UAW international union has now taken control of negotiations in the strike in an effort to impose a contract on striking workers. The Associated Press reported on Friday that the international dismissed local union representatives from negotiations on Monday, while declaring that the company had not shifted its demands for sweeping concessions in wages and benefits.

"The union sent its local bargainers back to their factories on Monday and reported that the company wasn't budging from its earlier proposals," wrote Tom Krisher for the AP, who went on to report that talks resumed Thursday with "top negotiators for American Axle and Manufacturing Holdings Inc. and the United Auto Workers."

Workers on the picket lines explained the decisive character of their struggle and their dismay at the conduct of the union. "It's all about looking good on Wall Street," said Lia. "I may never walk in these doors again if the contract involves cuts."

Scott said, "The UAW is supposed to be democratic, but we can't even vote for our own president. Our pay scale has been incorporated into an international contract. They know if we vote the contract down here at this plant, then there are four other plants—some of which are threatened with closure—that they can pressure to accept the deal."

"I started working here 14 years ago, after leaving the military," said Steve. "We started at \$12.55 an hour. We have had pay increases since then. Now they want to send us back to \$14.50? After inflation, that would mean that we would be earning less than we made when we started. This is all about greed, corporate greed. They want to make more money."

The arrest of striking workers on the AAM picket lines is an indication that the strike has reached a crucial point. With its takeover of the negotiations, the UAW international is working to implement a contract in line with the demands of the auto industry, at the expense of the jobs, wages and benefits of striking workers.

American Axle workers should organize strike committees, independent of the UAW, to expand the strike to workers at Delphi, Dana, GM, Ford and Chrysler and demand the restoration of all concessions and wage a fight against the union-management conspiracy to slash wages and benefits. Workers should demand the dropping of all charges against the arrested pickets.